



No Game No Life 11

YUU KAMIYA





No
Game



No
Life

11

YUU KAMIYA



LOOKS
LIKE THE
GAMER
SIBLINGS
AND
FRIENDS
CAN'T
LEAVE
UNLESS
THEY
BECOME
COUPLES!

No Game No Life 11

YUU KAMIYA





The Spratul was flipped upside down.
An explosion rang out as everything
vanished—not only the garden, but the
entire building, too.

Sora was in the bath while Steph
and the girls were resting in their
rooms when the building disappeared—
the four of them were shell-shocked at
the wasteland that stretched as far as
the eye could see.

**“I am
Black Shiro—
here to give
Brother his
final
judgment. ♡”**



"...Okay, **one last time**. Are you sure you can do this, Emir-Eins?"

"Affirmation: This unit will compile all captured visual and drone footage."

"Edited footage will be sent to **Master's** smartphone in a replayable format. Easy-peasy, hee-hee."

Female representatives from pretty much every race—women so beautiful, it's quite literally beyond human comprehension—and they're all here!! **Assembled** in the Elkia Royal Castle's **Great Bath!!**



THE TEN COVENANTS

The absolute law of this world, created by the god Tet upon winning the throne of the One True God. Covenants that have forbidden all war among the intelligent Ixseeds—namely.



1. In this world, all bodily injury, war, and plunder is forbidden.



2. All conflicts shall be settled by victory and defeat in games.



3. Games shall be played for wagers that each agrees are of equal value.



4. Insofar as it does not conflict with “3,” any game or wager is permitted.



5. The party challenged shall have the right to determine the game.



6. Wagers sworn by the Covenants are absolutely binding.



7. For conflicts between groups, an agent plenipotentiary shall be established.



8. If cheating is discovered in a game, it shall be counted as a loss.



9. The above shall be absolute and immutable rules, in the name of the God.

10. Let's all have fun together.



Stream Start



Ch. 1 In the Bottom

Vertical Thinking



Ch. 2 Lateral Approach

Horizontal Thinking



Ch. 3 Point at Infinity

Parallel Thinking



Ch. 4 Turning World

Orientation Shift



Temporary End

CONTENTS
11

No
Game
No
Life

YUU KAMIYA

11



NEW YORK

Copyright

NO GAME NO LIFE Volume 11
YUU KAMIYA

Translation by Richard Tobin
Cover art by Yuu Kamiya

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

NO GAME NO LIFE Volume.11
©Yuu Kamiya 2021

First published in Japan in 2021 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2022 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com
facebook.com/yenpress
twitter.com/yenpress
yenpress.tumblr.com
instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: May 2022

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.
The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kamiya, Yu, 1984 - author, illustrator. | Komen, Daniel, translator. | Tobin, Richard, translator.

Title: No game no life / Yuu Kamiya, translation by Daniel Komen, translation by Richard Tobin.

Other titles: No gemu no raifu. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen ON, 2015 -

Identifiers: LCCN 2015041321 | ISBN 9780316383110 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316385176
(v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316385190 (v. 3 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316385213 (v. 4 : pbk.) | ISBN
9780316385237 (v. 5 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316385268 (v. 6 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316316439
(v. 7 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316502665 (v. 8 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316471343 (v. 9 : pbk.) | ISBN
9781975386788 (v. 10 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975345495 (v. 11 : pbk.)

Subjects: | BISAC: FICTION / Fantasy / General. | GSAFD: Fantasy fiction.

Classification: LCC PL832.A58645 N6 2015 | DDC 895.63/6 —dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015041321>

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-4549-5 (print)

978-1-9753-4550-1 (ebook)

E3-20220421-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Stream Start

Chapter 1: Vertical Thinking

Chapter 2: Horizontal Thinking

Chapter 3: Parallel Thinking

Chapter 4: Orientation Shift

Temporary End

Afterword

Yen Newsletter



STREAM START

They say that you don't know if you found true love until it's already over.

Well, I guess I'll never know whether this is true love, the girl thought.

She didn't know when this love started—and yet.

The one thing the girl did know was that her love would *never* end.

—————.....

___The girl had no recollection of when this love of hers began.

But it wasn't when she first laid eyes on the boy.

It felt more like she'd loved him from the moment she was born—maybe earlier.

It was hard for her to remember how she even breathed before loving the boy.

She couldn't recall a time when she woke up for any reason other than him. There were no conceivable reasons to smile...other than to see him smile back.

She'd forgotten why she slept, if not to feel the warmth of his embrace...

The girl couldn't remember who she was before the boy came into her life, much less imagine it.

So she figured she must have been born to be with this boy. That she wasn't even alive until they first met.

Therefore, her death would come once her love ended—that much she was sure of.

Or maybe..., the girl thought.

Maybe if she were to die and be reborn, she'd seek out the boy again in her next life.

In that case, what if I'm already dead?

That would mean that she loved the boy in her previous life. It certainly explained why she couldn't remember anything.

I guess I'll never get the chance to find out what true love is, then.

Even death wasn't enough for her to find the true meaning of her love...



How long had it been since the girl had pondered all this?

The girl—Shiro—found herself standing before a door that day.

Shiro—and her older brother, of course—were joined by a superfluous trio.

The five of them stared at that door, which had words written on it... Words so large that no one could miss them:

A SPACE THAT ONLY COUPLES CAN LEAVE

That's right—in essence...

It declared in very blunt terms: Shiro and her brother weren't a couple.

The door was trying to pair her brother with someone other than herself. It implied the existence of a third party.

It suggested that her love, something that wasn't supposed to end even after death, was going to be brought to an end by this nebulous third party—a new enemy.

Heh...

That day, a slight grin appeared on Shiro's face...and she quietly raged...



The Kingdom of Elkia, its capital city.

The once downtrodden royal capital was bustling with the life and vigor of its many citizens. At its center was the Elkia Royal Castle, where three figures sat facing each other around a table.

One of the figures was a dark-haired, dark-eyed young man dressed in an “I ♥ PPL” shirt: Sora.

The second figure was atop his lap. A small girl with long white hair and ruby-colored eyes: Shiro.

The pair were the two rulers of Elkia, known and loved by their people by many a name, such as the Degenerate Monarchs, the Absentee Monarchs, and the Deadbeat Monarchs, among others.

The two rulers were in the midst of...working.

—That's right. These two were...*working*!!

...More accurately, they were playing a simple card game.

In this world of Disboard, where everything is decided by games,

the ruler of a country must also hold games.

While it may have appeared that they were simply playing around, any onlooker would recognize the duo was engaged in the noblest of endeavors.

Sitting across from the two diligent rulers was their opponent—a young noblewoman.

With the new land Elkia had acquired, the kingdom was quickly snapping up new resources and rare goods. Dealing with petitions for the rights to such goods from money-grubbing individuals—*ahem*, the dukes and earls—was usually the chief minister's responsibility.

When the request involves challenging the king directly, however, the king must answer the call of his people—

“Kay, that's my win. Sorry, but you're gonna need another million years before you can even hope to beat me. ♪”

Sora casually flipped his five cards over—it was more than evident that he had cheated, although there was no way of knowing for certain.

He almost seemed annoyed. And why wouldn't he? The girl was forcing him to work by challenging him to a game.

There was a silver lining to his labor, though.

“...I wouldn't expect anything less of our king. Your card skills are impeccable. I'm truly impressed.”

The young noblewoman stood up after having lost her match. She elegantly pinched the hem of her dress and curtsied.

“Now, in line with the Covenants—I'll serve you as a lady-in-waiting from this day forward.”

Had she won, her noble rank would've risen, allowing her family to oversee the new territories. Was she to lose, she would submit to the chief minister's policy and become a live-in maid at the castle.

Such were the terms of their game... Or well, they were supposed to be...

“...Hmm. Yeah, something weird's been going on lately...,” Sora mumbled suspiciously as he watched Ms. Ex-Noble-Turned-Lady-in-Waiting Number Five leave the chamber.

This marked the fifth time a ruler sent a young woman in their stead to challenge Sora to a game.

Even stranger was how the maids-to-be acted after they lost. None of them was sad or upset. In fact, they almost seemed happy about losing...

Not only did she lose access to new territories, but this high

society woman would be forced to wear maid outfits and serve tea at the castle. So...why did she pump her fist in victory as she left the room...?

“Hope it’s not some weird virus or whatever. I’d rather not deal with a pandemic in another world.”

Elkian civilization was much like Sora’s own world around the beginning of the fifteenth century—it went without saying that antibiotics didn’t exist yet.

A bad flu season would be enough to upend the kingdom, not to mention what it could do to Sora and his sister. He might even need to call on the Commonwealth of Elkia for an emergency conference—

“...Brother...this is why...you’re still, a virgin...”

“You think that me worrying about my country from time to time is the root cause of my involuntary celibacy?! Then down with the Elkia Kingdom!!”

In less than a heartbeat, Sora motioned to defer his sovereign duties upon hearing his sister’s coldhearted suggestion.

“What Lord Shiro is trying to say is that those women came here intent on losing.”

The beautiful voice that answered Sora belonged to someone who hadn’t been there moments ago.

A girl with cross-shaped pupils appeared out of thin air: Jibril, the Flügel.

“...? ...They *wanted* to lose?” he asked.

“Yes. I believe their true intentions were to acquire permission to serve you, Master.”

...*Huh. That’s a new one.* Sora furrowed his brow.

So these noble houses were handing off their daughters to the king under the guise of losing their wager—essentially cajoling Sora with feminine wiles and beauty. Losing a game could potentially bear more fruit than any land acquisitions.

Not to mention the off chance that one of these daughters might become queen.

For nobility, arranged marriages were just a part of business as usual.

“...So it was a honey trap set up by their parents? That doesn’t quite sit right...”

If that’s the case, I’d better send them all back home..., Sora thought. However:

“And why would it? I, for one, believe the girls are more than happy with the outcome,” said Jibril.

“...Hmm? What do you mean by happy?”

With Sora unable to read what she was getting at, Jibril continued

with an ear-to-ear smile and said, “Though I’m hardly well versed in the subtleties of Immanity emotion, it was more than evident to me that those girls felt the L word for you, Master. ♥”

The L word? What are we, in kindergarten?

Still, there’s no way that’s possible, Sora thought with a sigh.

“So naive, Jibril. Come on—what makes you think those girls have the hots for me?”

“With all due respect, Master, you ought to take a moment to examine yourself.”

Okay...

I’m an antisocial shut-in virgin gamer with no formal education or job, and I’ve never had a girlfriend.

He failed to see the point in analyzing his pathetic life.

“To start off, Master—you’re the savior of Elkia, Immanity’s sole surviving nation. You’re a hero to your race.” Jibril added a little flourish as she continued her grandiose speech. “You’re a traverser of dimensions who came to Disboard and saved the country from falling into the clutches of an Elf spy, conquering even magic itself... Had you not shown up, Immanity would have surely perished by now.”

...She’s not lying...

“And the moment you became king, you used your otherworldly knowledge to lift Elkia from dire straits!! You easily defeated me, a Flügel, then recouped Elkian land taken by the Eastern Union, the third-greatest country in the world—only to stop an evil plot by Oceand, before finally taking out an Old Deus and even conquering the Ex Machina!! And all without shedding a drop of blood.”

...Go on...

“Thus, the Elkia that was once on the verge of collapse is now positioned at the center of a multinational, multiracial commonwealth—the scale of which is comparable to that of Elven Gard.”

...Uh-huh...

“Even when standing before the mightiest of foes—foes Immanity could never dream of fighting—you are always up for the challenge!! You used your unparalleled wit to force your enemies to yield and at last managed to defeat a god. You broke down barriers, saw to the realization of prosperity among the races—a concept that none so much as fathomed before your arrival. Yes, you’re the manifestation of the limitless possibilities the Immanity harbor. A living legend!! ... *That is what you are, Master.*”

...Well, when you put it like that, it does sound pretty badass.

His tale was something epic—so long as you left out the “virgin” and “shut-in” parts.

Sora’s gaze grew distant and melancholic.

“Objectively speaking, Master—what reason is there *not* for you to be popular with females?”

“...Objectively speaking?”

She may have a point...?

Regardless of how Sora was as a person, not a single statement Jibril made was untrue.

“Even without these incredible feats, you’re the king of this nation—your personality aside, I feel it’s only natural for women to be attracted to your power and wealth.”

R-right. That’s true, too.

Arranged marriages between nobles didn’t sound great in terms of human rights, but marrying for status wasn’t an uncommon phenomenon, even in his own world. Sora had no criticisms to offer.

“So allow me to ask you once more—what reason do you *not* have to be popular with females?”

“...Um, uh...Shiro...? Milady? What do you make of Jibril’s analysis?”

The more he thought about it, the more her point stood to reason.

This reason, however, went against all his instincts, so he looked down to his sister atop his lap for confirmation.

Not surprisingly, Shiro explained why she had looked so upset this entire exchange.

“...Mm. Lately...Brother...you’ve been *too* popular...”

Her words of affirmation hit Sora like a proverbial ton of bricks.

They’re actually kinda right!

*Now that you mention it—I’m a frickin’ king!! The king of Immanity!
A king who saved the Immanity nation!!*

If that can’t get me girls, then what can?!

Besides, everything in this world is decided via games.

All forms of violence are forbidden, and all conflicts are settled through games.

Being good at games...is the sole form of strength permitted in this world!!

I’m the strongest Immanity of all—so it’s only inevitable that women would wanna get with me, right?!

“My apologies, Master, but you’re being far too modest.”

Without realizing it, he had said all this out loud. Jibril took the liberty of correcting him.

“You are indeed the world’s strongest Immanity—but the qualifier of *strongest* isn’t limited to the Immanity.”

...What...?

“You’ve already defeated the Flügel, as well as the Elf, Werebeast, Siren, Dhampir, Old Deus, and even the Ex Machina—you’ve proved to be more formidable than them all.”

S-so what are you getting at? I think I have an idea, but...?

“You mean to say that not only Immanity girls, but angel-girls and elf-girls and animal-girls, mermaids and vampiresses—and goddesses and cyborg-girls and mecha-girls have already genuflected before my might?!”

He couldn’t believe what he was saying. Sora was the most popular man in history—Nay...

Dare I say that this could be the first coming of the greatest and most popular man since the dawn of time—the alpha and omega of eligible bachelors?!

“Master... With this in mind, please allow me, Jibril, to suggest a proposal for you.”

“Oh...? A proposal to the king of the alpha males? Very well. I’ll allow it, but just this once. Let’s hear it.”

And thus, Jibril kneeled before the king who let his popularity with the ladies get to his head at the speed of light.

“Regarding the five maids-in-training—why not use them to create a harem?”

A harem: a place for the king’s many wives and lovers.

In other words: an actual harem, like the kind you see in manga.

“As you can tell from the looks on their faces, they won’t reject your invitation—in fact, I think they would each accept it with open arms. If you do go forward with the creation of a harem, my only wish is that you include me in your legion of female attendants. ♥”

...N-no... There’s no way I could ever... Could I?

Sora was just a man who kind of ended up being the most alpha male in the universe.

Upon hearing Jibril’s proposal, the once king of the virgins cast his gaze downward in fear.

He more than expected to be greeted with a subzero stare from his sister atop his lap—and yet.

“...Mm... Concubines...aren’t actual wives...technically...”

Her remark was far and beyond the realm of his expectations. Though apparently conflicted by the decision, Shiro raised a finger and continued:

“...I’ll allow it... Brother, ’grats on...popping your cherry...”

“STEEEEEEPH!! We’re building a harem! I’m gonna be the King of the Harems!!”

Strike while the iron's hot, as the saying goes.

Sora hoisted Shiro under one arm and shot into Steph's office like an arrow with the sound effects to match.

Seated at a desk was a redheaded girl working diligently on some documents.

She was Stephanie Dola, chief minister of Elkia. Slowly, almost sluggishly, she turned to face him.

And then—with a calm and collected expression, she heaved a deep sigh before...enlightening Sora.

“...It's about time to wake up now, don't you think?”

_____?

Hold up. What's Steph talking about? I haven't the slightest idea.

Oh. OH. I see what's going on here.

Sounds to me like Steph wants in on the King of the Alphas' almighty harem.

There, there, silly goose. You've nothing to fear, for the alpha supreme Sora will make sure all his ladies are satisfied—

“...You're aware this is a dream, right?”

“.....Uh? Wait, what?”

The second he heard Steph say the word “dream”—it hit him like a freight train.

He heard a massive cracking sound as his vision drained of all color.

“I assume you're not so delusional as to think a girl would ever like you...”

The cracking intensified with every word that escaped her lips.

Perhaps it was the sound of shattering dreams.

Wh-why though...?

I—I mean, I'm the universe's...strongest gamer...

“Uh-huh, right. I think you mean *gamers*, with an s, since you're only the strongest when you're paired with Shiro. Alone, Sora, you're —”

_____*Crack!*

It's possible this was also the sound of Sora's heart cracking to pieces.

St-stop... Don't say any more...!

“—nothing more than a toddler—no, an infant—who can't even walk and talk on his own, let alone play games.”

_____*Crack, crack!*

Sora realized that noise was indeed his own heart breaking into pieces.

He attempted to say something—*anything*—to get Steph to stop talking—

J-just stop already...will ya?!

“You’re a lying, conniving con artist. You act all tough, but in reality, you lack even the slightest inkling of self-confidence. You say you want to be popular with women, but the second one shows an iota of interest, you run in the opposite direction. You want a girlfriend, but since you can’t tell the difference between affection and sexual desire, you have no idea what you actually want to do. You’re a sly, cowardly, pathetic failure of a man—*that* is what you are, Sora.”

Finally, the cracking became deafening.

Sora listened to the sound of his own heart crumbling and... Ah...

“You never work at all, and you barely show yourself to your own people. You’re a lazy, shut-in king. Why would you ever think women would like you or see you as an object of desire? Why don’t you quit it with your ridiculous dreaming and get some work done for once in your life?”

Sora heard Steph’s voice growing increasingly distant.

As his consciousness faded, Sora grinned ever so slightly.

Yeah, I’m perfectly aware... I always knew it was all a dream from the very start. It was a no-brainer, really. I knew it from the get-go, seeing as Shiro and I entered the scene hard at work. But so what? Can’t a guy dream...? Like, can’t I at least dream inside of my dream?

And thus, as he slowly came to, Sora felt something he’d experienced tens of thousands of times prior.

...I mean, c’mon, at least lemme get to the kinky part before you wake me up...



“Sora!! Shiro!! You’re in there, right?! Are you asleep?!”

From under his sheets, Sora could hear Steph hollering for him while she pounded on his door.

Ah—she’s gonna kick me out of bed and try getting me to work like she always does, just like in my dreams.

Answering the all-too-familiar voice of reality, Sora replied hoarsely—barely eking out his response:

“...It’s not like I’ll get a girlfriend today anyway. I don’t wanna get out of bed...”

“That is definitely the weirdest excuse you’ve given to escape work yet!! If you’re in there, hurry up and come out already!!”

Steph shouted through the door and began kicking it, only to be ignored by Sora, who cocooned himself deeper within his blankets.

—After awakening from his dream, Sora cried.

He buried his face in his pillow and sobbed to the point of exhaustion.

He wept not because he couldn't achieve a harem even within the confines of his dreams—but because he awoke to a harsh reality that he never wished to know.

Yes—Sora was a virgin.

Yes, he was speeding down the highway to loserdom in his shut-in, jobless vehicle.

But just as Jibril stated in his dream, despite him being a total loser, he was half of the strongest pair of gamers in this world. That much was fact, and it was also a fact that he was an honest-to-goodness king.

And even with his kingly might and authority, he remained unpopular with women.

So what did Sora have to do to get a girlfriend? The answer was clear as day:

It was impossible—he was helpless...

And thus, Sora managed to speak, his voice hoarse from all his crying:

“The only reason a man has to live...is to get the girl...”

—What is our purpose?

An age-old question, but a question that is all too obvious among the male sex.

In terms of biology, that purpose is to mate with a superior specimen.

In brutally honest terms, the only reason men do anything is to look cool.

In other words, men want to have women look at them and go “Ooooh, he's hot! ♥” with actual hearts in their eyes!!

The reason men risk their lives for fame and fortune—and even live in the first place—is *because they want attention from the ladies!!*

So what if... Just what if that wasn't *necessarily* the case?

That no matter how much you risked your hide, no matter how much fame or fortune you acquired—you'd never see hearts appear in a lady's eyes, you'd end your life without ever being loved or even noticed by a girl?

“...I know I'll never be popular with women, and yet I wake up... Why, though? Why do I go on living, despite knowing that every single thing I ever do will amount to nothing? Ah... I'm so tired...”

It was all so exhausting.

Sora was tired of his bachelor reality.

He was tired of not even being able to dream of getting girls.

“Hey, Shiro... Your brother is probably gonna die right here in this bed. You don’t mind that, do ya...?”

“...Zzz...”

Sora hugged his little sister, sleeping audibly next to him. He knew these would be the last tears he ever shed. He closed his eyes, when—

“What are you even talking about?! Just get up already, okay?! We have an emergency on our hands!! We’re—*stuck!*”

“My apologies, Master. It appears I can neither shift nor use my magic at the moment—”

“Addendum: Current location unknown. All known exits have been demolished. Unable to confirm existence of food and water. Conclusion: I predict Master’s and his companions’ lives are in danger. Things are pretty bad.”

Upon hearing the second and third reports after Steph’s, Sora finally sat up with Shiro.

———.....*What?*

“...Huh? Where are we?”

Eventually managing to pull themselves out of bed, the two of them left their room.

This wasn’t the Elkia Royal Castle, nor was this room their humble bedchamber.

In the room they had *never seen before* stood Steph—as well as a Flügel girl with a halo atop her head and an Ex Machina with violet hair: Jibril and Emir-Eins.

According to them, they were unable to shift, use magic, or destroy the building.

Faced with this unsettling news, Steph anxiously continued:

“So it looks like Sora doesn’t know what’s going on, either... We all woke up in this strange room... Where could this possibly be? Moreover—why are we here?”

Sora, Shiro, Steph, Jibril, and Emir-Eins: The five of them awoke in an unfamiliar room and had no idea how or why they were there...

Unable to use magic, the group found themselves in this seemingly inescapable space without any food or water.

Just as Steph screamed to Sora earlier, this was, in fact, an emergency. Sora took a moment to calm down and look at his surroundings.

It was indeed a room he’d never seen before—and it was

something of a fancy room, at that.

The room was without a single window, so there was no way for them to see the conditions outside.

The only objects inside were a sofa and table, along with five chairs.

There were also...four small doors and one lone, giant door.

The small doors led to the chamber where Sora and Shiro had come to, as well as the chambers where their three companions had awakened.

This meant that if there was a way out of here, chances were...it was the big door. Without saying a word, Sora walked up to it.

...There was no knob or keyhole. He pushed against the door, but it didn't budge.

This was, however, a given. And that was because...

Sora stood there and stared at the note posted on the door, and the others soon joined him.

That's right: All five knew without a shadow of a doubt that this was their biggest problem.

They stared at the door in unison.

To be more precise, they stared at the note posted on the door—written in the Immanity language. It said:

A SPACE THAT ONLY COUPLES CAN LEAVE



Sooo...

"S-Sora?! Why are you crying all of a sudden?!" came Steph's muffled voice.

Tears of gratitude ran down Sora's cheeks—gratitude for the reality he had lamented only moments earlier.

...It was a long eighteen years. He'd been in this world for a considerable amount of time, too.

But finally. It was here. The chance he'd been waiting for had finally presented itself!!

Yes—a space that only couples could leave!!

Couple, noun. Two persons paired together; two persons married, engaged, or otherwise romantically paired.

Sora and Shiro clearly fit the first definition, but that kind of "couple" didn't apply here, given how they weren't able to leave this room together.

Which could only mean—the "couple" in this note referred to the

“romantically paired” variety!

And what’s more! There were four women and a single male!

This meant that they were stuck in a space they couldn’t leave without first getting into a relationship!

Sora was only just crushed by the harsh reality that he’d never get a girlfriend—how could he not weep at this news...?

This was the event that would end his girlfriend-less streak, the lengths of which equaled...every waking minute of his entire life!!

—Oh? You think it’ll just end one step before he gets to the good part, like always?

Heh-heh. That’s not what Sora’s after.

He was trapped in a room with four other people. There was no way he could do the deed in there. It’d actually be really strange if someone was stuck in a room they had to bump uglies to get out of, much less with spectators present. Maybe they first needed to go on a date or something? Anyhow, that’s not what Sora was after to begin with!!

It didn’t matter if bumping uglies was nothing more than an excuse to get out of this room!!

The minute Sora escaped, he would upgrade from “an eighteen-year-old virgin who’s never had a girlfriend before” to “an eighteen-year-old virgin who had a girlfriend once, even if only for a second”!!

What’s the difference, you ask?

I’ll have you know there is a *very* big difference between the two.

Why wasn’t this man—a king and half of the strongest gaming duo ever—popular with women?

—He believed this was due to the *zero-product property*!!

No matter how much fame or fortune he amassed, when multiplied by zero, it all amounted to nothing—however!

If he was able to get a girlfriend, even if for a minute—no, for 0.1 seconds—it could pave the way for an answer that was greater than zero for once!!

A virgin who’s never had a girlfriend versus a virgin who had a girlfriend but soon broke up with her—it was clear to Sora that the difference between these two was even greater than the chasm separating the heavens and the earth!!

...Granted, he wasn’t about to let himself get too optimistic—the five of them were still in a pickle.

They had no recollection as to how they got in this destitute room where their lives were in danger and they were being forced to pair up into relationships...

The Ten Covenants, however, should prevent any abduction and

confinement, as well as the unsolicited erasure of memory.

The only exception to this rule was when both parties gave their *consent* to do so. This meant they'd brought their current situation upon themselves.

That's right—it was most definitely a *game* they were in.

They weren't sure who they were up against or what their goal was—these were part of the game's terms—but it was a game nonetheless; ergo, it was beatable.

If I didn't think it was beatable, then I would've never agreed to play in the first place.

Unless, of course, I did it out of desperation because I can't get a girlfriend!

There was no way Sora would get himself into a game he couldn't win just for the LOLs...!!

In other words: Nothing to fear.

His key to a perfect, happy victory was standing right next to him, potential foreshadowing be damned.

Having thought all this in less than a millisecond, Sora turned his gaze to the four ladies with him.

Now, which one of these little pretties will be my coveted first girlfriend? Who, who, whoooooo?!

“Clarification: Circumstances ascertained. The solution is incredibly simple. A cinch. *Einfar.*”

The first one to make their move was, well, somewhat predictable.

The mecha-girl sporting a maid outfit and violet hair leaned into Sora's right arm—and continued:

“Recapitulation: Current space is escapable through the creation of couples. This unit loves her master. Loves him. Very much. This unit loves you. Hee-hee-hee. With the annunciation of the two words ‘Me too,’ our unification as a couple shall be complete. Current space shall be escapable. Now, Master. *Répète après moi*: Me too.”

Hearing her sweet whisper graze his ear, Sora was the very picture of a man thinking something quite lewd.

In other words—he listened with the most serious expression humanly possible.

Heh... So my first girlfriend will be Emir-Eins. Not too shabby, eh? She might have a few screws loose up there, and sure, she's pretty dim-witted and forceful in her ways, but looks-wise? She's a bona fide babe.

More importantly, she's a friggin' cyborg maid who calls me Master—let's run with it!

“In that case, Master, please allow me to play the part of your girlfriend.”

Just as Sora chose to take up the Ex Machina’s offer willy-nilly, Jibril leaned into his left arm as if to tip the scale back to level.

“You needn’t settle for this inexperienced heap of scrap metal, Master. You have me as your servant. You can use me like a twenty-four-hour convenience store: open all day, every day. I’ll provide you with everything you need from one morning to the next. ♥”

“Rebuttal: Flügel, who nay understand the subtleties of human emotion, are not fit to service Master.”

“Oh? And this assessment is coming from artificial intelligence that can’t even pick up when her master is avoiding her, is it not?”

“Comprehension: Hearing defect detected in Irregular Number. It must be their age. How unfortunate.”

“It’s certainly better than a brain defect. Oh, so sorry. I forgot you don’t have a brain. ♪”

The murderous hostility of the two girls bickering with Sora wedged between them was palpable.

This was typically enough to make Sora cower in fear, but with an even more intense expression than before, he was considering his options.

Hmmm. Jibril, my first girlfriend—no problems there. When I take a moment to think about it, Jibril, my self-proclaimed servant, could easily cross over into the realm of lover. Unlike Emir-Eins, who’d potentially force herself onto her master, Jibril would heed his every wish—she’s up for anything. Whoa, whoa, whoa, what’s going on here?! Yo, this actually feels great! I feel like I’m the main character of my life for once!! That isn’t to say a part of me doesn’t question why a pathetic virgin such as myself gets to pick which girl he dates. Nevertheless, we are at the discretion of the situation at hand! We have no choice but to go forward with this!!

Maaan, it’s hard being such a chick magnet!!

“W-wait! Isn’t there a different problem at hand?!” Steph yelled at Sora, who was swaying back and forth while daydreaming lustful thoughts.

“Negative: Woman of unknown name has rejected to show affection toward Master on multiple occasions. Therefore, you have no right to speak. Recommending a prompt retreat from Master. Shoo, shoo.”

“Or could it be that little Dora has finally accepted that she has feelings for our master? ♥”

“Wh-whaaat?! No, th-that’s not even remotely related to what I’m

saying!!”

Hrmmm, but maybe Steph really is suited to be my first girlfriend. She'd be the best fit in a more traditional sense. She can cook and sew; she's pretty well-rounded. And there's something cozy and familiar about her, too. Plus, she's definitely beautiful but not too beautiful. Average is best at the end of the day. No matter how much extravagant, delicious food you indulge in, no one wants to eat that all the time; you gotta go back to the basics.

Sora pondered over how reliable Steph was, how she really fit the girl-next-door heroine type. When she spoke again, his deluge of thoughts came to a stop.

“Only couples can leave—this means that no more than four of us can leave!!”

—...

Huh?

“There are five of us!! If we can only leave the room in sets of two, what will the one person left behind do?!”

“Is that not what we're talking about, though? If Master and I become a couple, then you're the natural option to be paired with Lord Shiro. The remaining person—*that* is the person we shall kill. It shouldn't even be a matter of question at this point that the one most suitable for such a fate is the heap of scrap metal over there.”

—...

Wait! Is that what's going on here?!

“Negative: Definition of couple unclear. Assuming at least one unit of the couple must harbor feelings for the other. This unit adores her master. Therefore, this unit has determined that her master and she should become a couple, starting immediately. As for Master's little sister, she can command Irregular Number to have feelings for her. Therefore, it is woman of unknown name who shall perish. You.”

“Feelings of love can be created easily through a game by the Covenants, so we can ignore the white noise coming from the scrap metal over there... But little Dora, are you insinuating that you and that thing you call a brain picked up on something before even our master did?”

“Inevitability: The question is who shall perish. That is why Master wept.”

“Sora... I-is that true?!”

“.....”

Steph demanded an answer, but Sora was unable to provide one. He couldn't possibly tell her that the thought never entered his mind.

There were too many things flitting through his head at once to pick up on such details.

Wait, wait, wait—if that's the case, then it changes everything. Think, Sora, virgin, age eighteen, think!!

The girls were right. According to the note, no more than four of them could leave.

And obviously...*same-sex couples count!*

Crap, this is bad. Crap, crap, crap, crap, crap—craaaap!!

In that case, Sora, the pathetic excuse for an eighteen-year-old virgin, knew exactly what was coming up next, right?

"I won't let that happen! I refuse to even play with the idea of forsaking one of us five!" Steph shouted.

"Request: Alternate ways out of this room. If none exist, then this unit shall escape by becoming a couple with Sora. Therefore, it is more realistic to conceive a method to save the fifth member who will be left behind. Also known as woman of unknown name over there."

"No need!! Just look at how troubled Sora is by all this!! He's thinking up a way out for us as we speak, right, Sora?"

As unfortunate as it was to get Steph's hopes up—that wasn't what Sora was thinking about in that moment.

It was definitely something he would have to think about eventually. As soon as possible, at that.

But in that moment, Sora's mind was plagued with a different set of thoughts, a matter that required his brain to work at full capacity.

He was trying to figure out *where to lead this situation*.

How he could amend his prediction that he'd leave this space with a girlfriend—in other words—

"...Everyone— Shut. Up."

This was when Shiro, who had been wordlessly staring at the ground, finally spoke.

Silence fell when her command reached her friends' ears.

This was followed by her swaying, with the expression comparable only to the grim reaper's as she looked up.

—It goes without saying that nobody there had any way of knowing what Shiro felt on the inside.

By that point, however, Shiro had quietly blown a fuse after being faced with the fact that she and her brother were not a couple.

Moreover, she watched as nobody suggested she and Sora pair up. It wasn't even considered.

So she decided:

“...You guys...wanna play, a game...?”

She smiled, stifling her volcanic rage, and continued:

“...Loser, has to...destroy any feelings, they have for Brother...and instead *hate him*... After that...we can decide...who will become couples...”

In Shiro's eyes, this was more important than her life—it was a game that wagered her love.

Ah, this is the perfect chance. I can get rid of you all here—one by one.

It was an opportunity to determine who the real heroine of the story was.

It was Shiro's challenge to the other girls: a clear declaration of war—Nay...

...A declaration that she'd *eradicate* them...

Even though they didn't know how she felt on the inside, the animosity that permeated from Shiro's every pore was palpable. And sure enough...

“Engage: Attempting to steal away this unit's love. The essence of an Ex Machina. Take care of threats. Elimination of all obstacles. Eradication of foes by all means necessary. That is what Ex Machina are. Fight to the death. This unit will not lose.”

“While the concept of love is still above this inept servant of yours—if you would, Lord Shiro, *allow me to fight back*; then I'll play against you with every ounce of power in my body. If you're willing to humor me with your grace, I'll give it my all.”

The air around Jibril and Emir-Eins shimmered with their burning desire to fight.

“I—I don't even have feelings to forfeit in the first place!!” Steph cried in desperation, but:

“Command: Give the orders for a game. This unit's analysis—woman of unknown name is the largest potential threat. This unit shall take this opportunity to remove any and all obstructions from her love. Not a single one of you will escape. Now playing term*natortheme.mp3.”

“If you have nothing to lose, little Dora, then what's the problem?”



“...Steph...let's put an end...to this BS...'kay...?”

The chief minister was surrounded by three women who had no intention of letting any of the others leave this room with their emotions intact.

“S-Sora?! C-could you please stop these girls?!”

They closed in on Steph: Emir-Eins with a scowl, Jibril with a

smile, and Shiro with a cold grin.

Steph called out for help as the situation grew direr and direr—However...

SLAM!!

...she was answered with a loud slam that instantaneously silenced the room.

“...The hell are you guys doing? Look at you... You need to get more serious about this.”

After slamming his fist against the door with enough force to smash his own hand, all eyes were on Sora, who continued yelling at the four ladies.

“You know I’d never agree to a game that could only be solved this way!! Right?!”

That’s right—there was no way he’d ever allow it.

The fact that they were in this room meant that he gave his consent at some point—but regardless:

There was no way he would ever let a situation like this happen!

The reason being that there was just one conceivable outcome for how this game would end. And that was:

The birth of two girl-on-girl couples, with Sora left in the dust!!

“Let us outta here!! I don’t know how you did it, but you frickin’ set us up!!”

“S-Sora! That means...!”

“There’s no way I’d ever agree to a game like this! Two pairs out of five people?! Why would I ever let something as terrible as this slide?! There’s gotta be other rules involved, so tell us them already!!”

He passionately petitioned the game’s host—who should have been around there somewhere—as his soul called out for the truth.

It was like that one bad experience he had back in elementary school: *All right, class, get into pairs of two.*

The hatred in Sora’s voice snapped the ladies out of their fervor and back to reality.

“...Master is right. The thought of a sacrifice is always outside the realm of Master’s planning...”

“Penitence: Win thoroughly, without a single victim. That is who our master is. This unit is truly ashamed.”

“.....Is it just me, or...does it seem like Sora wasn’t aware of the

situation until now?”

I knew what was going on 0.001 seconds into this!!!!

“.....Brother...you dumbass.”

“D-dammiiiiiiiit...!!”

Only one of the girls was able to predict the inner conflict Sora had just undergone. Shiro shot her older brother an icy stare.

Sora hit the door so hard, though, that he was now on the floor crying out in pain—however.

The door that wasn’t supposed to open for anyone but couples... had suddenly opened up, leaving the rest of the group flabbergasted.



They couldn’t open this door no matter how hard they hit it, and yet—it all made sense now.

—It was a sliding door.

Sora went up to the door and gave it a good tug to one side, which sent it flying open. The momentum pulled Sora through and had him fall over onto the ground.

“You mean to tell me it was that simple?! Not one of you tried... sliding...it—?”

Sora looked up and lashed out angrily, but the words quickly petered out.

“Sora?! Are you all right—? Oh...”

“Master, are you hurt—?!”

The girls followed Sora out the door, only to gasp at what they saw.

The sight that played out before them left them similarly speechless.

—They were in a small garden.

It was a field of colorful flowers. Petals fell through the air around them. The edges of the garden were lined by walls made from rosebushes, and beyond those walls was a forest full of leafless trees.

Cute flower buds from springtime, healthy summer leaves, autumnal flowers in full bloom, and hardy bulbs from winter...

A collage of nature’s beauty—something only the most outstanding of artists was capable of creating—this garden was almost unnaturally canvas-like.

The gate to this garden, which was woven from flowers, was adorned with a gorgeous plaque that bore the same words from earlier:

A SPACE THAT ONLY COUPLES CAN LEAVE

A space, the note said...

There was nothing that suggested the room where Sora and the others started was necessarily that space...

However, what left the group speechless wasn't their simple mistake nor the scenery.

They were shocked at what floated through the middle of the garden, perched on top of a remarkably large flower.

It was a young girl—and on her back were a pair of wings that seemed to be woven from rainbows.

Although, actually...she wasn't necessarily *young*.

More like short. No taller than a toddler.

Regardless—with lime-colored eyes and lemon-colored pigtails decorated with a flower, the small figure gazed vacantly into space. Long, slender arms and legs, a subtle bust, and a thin physique; she appeared to be a young girl on the cusp of maturity, with the slightest hint of seductive charm about her.

So yeah. It was more like she was just...small.

She was mystical, like a beautiful doll brought to life.

This magical little girl was far too small to be a human. She was more like—

“___A Fairy?! B-but that would put us inside a spatial phase boundary: a Spratul!!”

“Emergency: Confirmed presence of a dangerous third-party race. Requesting immediate formation of a battle plan by Master. Yikes.”

Jibril and Emir-Eins squared up from behind Sora and got ready to attack.

The Flügel and the Ex Machina: the two most powerful races with borderline cheat-code levels of strength. And two of their members had instinctively prepared for battle. In retrospect, Sora should've taken this a bit more seriously. As incredibly unfortunate as it was, this pathetic eighteen-year-old virgin was in no shape to be thinking that clearly.

A Fairy, you say...

This was a potential solution—for the outcome Sora would never yield to.

The appearance of a sixth person meant this game could be cleared!!

It was abundantly clear that the girl was a Fairy. She must have been the challenger they were up against!

Chances were that she was not only the culprit who sealed them

away but a new character—or, putting it differently, she was the tiny heroine charged with the unfortunate task of pairing up with the group's fifth wheel (Sora)!!

Still, Sora couldn't shake the feeling that the size difference might be a bit much for his first girlfriend...

He was, however, a virgin—and in no place to be picky about minor details. It should be fine!

Hey baby, how ya doing? You must be my partner. I won't take no for an answer!!

Sora toyed with such inane come-ons, yet his expression was the height of seriousness.

Even if it was only temporary, he was going to get a girlfriend. Seeing as this was their first time meeting, there was no way the Fairy had any inkling of what kind of person Sora was. All he had to do was nail the first impression; it was the foothold he needed to bring this relationship to fruition!

Sora's eyes were brimming with passion. He wasn't going to let this chance slip through his fingers.

Jibril and Emir-Eins remained vigilant; the tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife.

The Fairy, however, paid no mind to any of the five visitors as she danced whimsically through the air.

Yes—she was dancing.

Her arms extended outward, she caressed the air as she danced atop her stage, the flower petals. With every step she took, a cascade of bubbles spouted from the flower bud.

This wasn't some sort of show she was putting on for them. Carried by the wind, the bubbles floated throughout the garden, and every time one popped, something new took its place: a flower, a tree, a stone, a spring, all painted in heavenly colors.

Though they didn't quite grasp *why* this was happening, Sora, Shiro, and even Steph had an idea of what it was.

—Fairy magic.

The Fairy was dancing her way through the field, adding on to her small garden wherever she went.

Before long, the Fairy ceased her frolicking, perhaps deciding it was time for a break.

She elegantly chose a flower to sit on, letting out a small sigh while rolling her shoulders back.

It was a cute little sigh, sure to capture the hearts of all whose ears happened upon it. Coming off the cusp of her sigh, she spoke her first words.

They were:

“Gawd, this blows... Why do I gotta be the one to deal with this dumb garden, anyway? Ugh, this sucks balls.”

She squatted down on the flower in the most indecent posture imaginable...as those dreamy words left her lips.

Jesus Christmas. Sora’s first (to-be) girlfriend sounded like a punk.

The small Fairy—the epitome of adorable—glared into the distance, looking downright pissed off.

Sora and crew watched, stunned, as the tiny Fairy nonchalantly pulled out a match and cigar from her skirt pocket and began smoking; her quick motions in doing so suggested it was most definitely a force of habit.

She flicked the ash off her cigar and onto the ground.

“Aaaah, that hits the spot... Oh? Ohhhh... You guys’re awake already? That was fast. Uh, yeah. Just wait there a bit longer for me, okay? I still gotta set up the game and stuff, so yeah, just chill out over there for a bit.”

She opened her mouth wide and exhaled a large puff of smoke before continuing:

“Criminy... Where do they get off thinkin’ I can prepare this entire space all by my lonesome—? Oh, shit!! The ashes—they got on my skirt! It’s gonna burn! It’s burning! Somebody get me some water!!”

With a loud yell, she flicked her half-smoked cigar off in the distance and flew around in a panic.

After a brief stint of running around like a chicken with its head cut off, she eventually realized she could put out the flames with magic and quickly began dancing again.

...Well, this is...kind of a letdown...

“...Jibril, uh...is that a Fairy...?”

“Yes, Master. She is without a doubt one of the ninth-ranked Ixseed—a Fairy.”

___The ninth-ranked Ixseed: the Fairies...

Sora and Shiro knew the bare minimum about the race: that most of the Fairies were in Elven Gard, living as slaves under the Elves.

According to Chlammy’s memories, they replenished the nation’s magic, the details of which were a national secret.

But anyway, forget about all that.

“...Fairy, my ass... She sounds like an old bartender...”

Sora couldn't hold back his shock. Fairies were completely different from what he'd imagined.

Just moments before, she was literally frolicking through a field of flowers; but the panicked little dance she did to put out the flames made her look more like a veteran stripper giving her last lap dance. She came off like an old lady past her prime, one who'd been around the block a few times only to wake up on the rougher side of middle age.

Look, she's dancing with a cigar in her mouth. Not to mention all the exasperated sighing.

And she keeps taking a drink out of something... Is that alcohol?

You've gotta be kidding me... My first girlfriend's gonna be a chain-smoking MILF who reeks of booze?

I mean, I did recognize earlier that I wasn't in the position to beg or choose, but I don't think I can stomach...that.

I don't even think I could see us together in my dreams...

"...Master, my apologies. I'm not quite sure what I could do... What are your orders?"

"Caution: Zero examples found of Fairies losing in battle while in a Spratul. Unable to calculate a plausible course of action."

Sora's grief was cut short by his two on-edge friends.

"...? Ummm...are Fairies really that strong?"

The two women nodded at Sora, who wished to know why they were being so antsy.

"Yes. During the Great War, they were ranked in the top seven Ixseed and managed to wipe out Flügel in the double digits."

"Record: The Alt-Ortcluster, four hundred thirty-seven units strong, once launched an attack within a Spratul—not a single unit returned. They were *decimated*."

Whoa, whoa. Is this a joke or what?

No, wait. The Great War is over. Things won't get that bad—well, they shouldn't.

But just looking at the expressions on Jibril's and Emir-Eins's faces was enough to make Sora, Shiro, and Steph gulp.

That Fairy—she said she was getting a game ready for them.

Was it okay to let her continue? Should they try to do something before she finished?

But still—what would they do? There was nothing Sora could—

"There we go!! Just in the nick of time! Right, now let's get started... *Ahem...* Testing, testing... Aaand we're off!"

The Fairy girl shouted out, stopping Sora and company

midthought.

She hastily put out her cigar and cleared her throat before checking her voice, and then:

“—Whoa?! The heck?!”

In the next instant, Sora and the others found themselves trapped inside bubbles.

The five of them were thoroughly ignored—and without further ado, everything started.



“Heeey! ♪ What’s up, my wee li’l subscribers; it’s Foeniculum comin’ atcha! ♣”

The Fairy had done a complete one-eighty.

She was acting more like how one would expect her to going off just her looks.

Suddenly, background music started playing. The Fairy whose name was evidently Foeniculum began speaking to an audience—but that audience wasn’t Sora and the girls.

She was speaking to a flat square of light.

“I have the most fantastic video planned out for our channel today, just like I promised— HEY!! Whaddaya think you’re doing, downvoting me like that, you li’l shits?! I’ll come knock the crap outta ya! We literally just started the stream, for gawd’s sake! ...Aw, I’m just joking. I wouldn’t want you guys to unsubscribe! There’s only one li’l shit in this world, and thaaaat’s me! Mwah! ♣”

Five seconds into the video, and the mask had already slipped. Sora watched, unfamiliar with Fairies or their magic.

Be that as it may, what the hell is this?

The moment he questioned the scene, the Fairy gave him his answer:

“Really and truly! We have a super-cool, super-fun video in store for you guys!! And here’s what we’re calling it!!”

That’s right: The square of light—her screen—showed an image.

It could only be described as a livestream. One run by a bottom-tier streamer, none other than...

“Channel Foeniculum presents: an original special event!!
Streaming live, in real time, an authentic love documentary—it’s the Space That Only Couples Can Leave

or They're Stuck Here Forever shooooooooow! ❀

Obnoxiously loud firecrackers went off, accompanied by a cheap trumpet sound effect.

"Now—let's get started by explaining this episode for our viewers."

"Wait a second! Should you explain it to *us* first?!"

Sora barked out a complaint from his bubble, but it seemed his words wouldn't reach Foeniculum.

Regardless, she continued to ignore the group as she explained the goal of her show.

"This is a Spratul, a space I created, and it's where I'll be trapping this group of five men and women! They'll be living here together for an *unlimited* and *indefinite amount of time*, to fight in a battle of loooove!!"

It was apparent that Sora and the others were correct in their assessment. This left them each with the same question in their minds.

"There are two ways for them to escape!"

Exactly—they wanted to know the way out.

Hearing that there was a second possible way out had the group's attention.

"The first is for a pair of guests to declare themselves a couple. Then all they have to do is hold hands and pass through the gate!"

That was the method they all expected. Evidently, the gate in the back of the garden was an exit.

"The other method requires a key that can be purchased. This key allows for our guests to leave even if they're alone!"

A key...?

The five furrowed their collective brow at this new information. Nevertheless, the Fairy continued to ignore them.

"Yeah, yeah. ❀ I can already hear you guys saying, *That's all you got?* and *What do you expect?* It's *Foeniculum*. Well, keep talkin' because you'll be eating your words later! Just be sure not to lose your jaw when it drops to the floor!! And now for the moment you've all been waiting for—they'll shock you, they'll leave you in awe! Please allow me to introduce our five guests!!"

The next moment, Sora and the girls found themselves unwittingly striking poses as the Fairy introduced them:



“That’s all five members! They’re the hottest singles in town over in Disboard, and we’re gonna watch them duke it out for love!! Whaddaya think of that lineup?! Don’t worry, I’ll give you a moment to reattach your mandibles!”

...Perhaps her viewers’ jaws were *literally* dropping.

It felt like Sora and crew were a part of a low-budget dating sim—like they were part of the title sequence for one.

They each had their own theme songs and dumb catchphrases.

Foeniculum, however, showed no sign of even acknowledging the five. She continued, her spunky attitude unabated.

“You don’t need me to tell you that this space lacks both food and water!! Provisions for our five guests will be paid for by tips from our viewers—with the exception of the Flügel and the Ex Machina, the other three won’t last longer than three days without water! You wouldn’t want your favorite member to die now, would you?! Who could live with that?! So you better send in your money if you want ’em to survive! ❀”

She was simultaneously begging and threatening her viewers for money like some desperate Sn*pchat influencer.

“Now then!! That brings us to the end of our launch for today! ❀”

And finally:

“The stream will start at eight PM every night! Share it with your friends!! But don’t send them clips!! Link them to our page!! I’ll see ya tomorrow! Bye-byye! ❀”

She finished the stream without giving Sora and the others a chance to speak.

The so-called launch video came to an end.



The bubbles the group was trapped in popped.

But they were left even more speechless with what followed. The five of them watched in silence as:

“Heh-heh-heh... Look at all these new viewers! I knew having guests on would be the quickest way to get the cash rolling in! Ha-ha!! All those losers in the comments can suck it!! LMFAOOOO!!”

Barely a moment later, Foeniculum already had her next cigar in hand and was doubled over, cackling.

Speechless as he was, Sora nonetheless had an inkling that her stream might still be live, prompting him to quietly alert her:

“...Are you sure...the mic and camera are off?”

“Kyaaaaan! ❀ Thanks again, everybody, as always! ❀”

Foeniculum chucked her cigar to the side with supersonic speed as she addressed her viewers.

Then, after properly checking to make sure the camera was indeed off this time:

“...Holy shit... They’re totally dragging me in the comments... Still, I guess some drama oughtta bring more attention to the stream.”

She pretended to brush it off, despite the visible sheen of cold sweat on her face. Sora rubbed his temples and asked:

“Uh... How about we go over the rules again, then... So what are we doing?”

“Hmm? Did you not watch the video I just made?” Foeniculum wondered whether she’d forgotten to explain something, then went on. “Use your...what were they called again? Smartphones? Tablets? Whatever they are, you can use those devices to check how many tips you’ve received.”

Sora and Shiro followed her directions and took out their smart devices.

And there it was: a new icon they’d never seen before.

They tapped the icon and saw a number: 15,000.

“Looks like you already have a patron! ❀ You can use that money to buy goods. Either you become a couple with one of your fellow guests, or you save up enough money to buy a key. That pretty much sums it up.”

Sounds easy, right?

Sora took a deep breath and replied:

“.....Right. There’s just one more important detail I’d like to confirm.”

It was a simple game indeed, but there was still an overarching problem. Depending on the answer to his question, the game would be either heaven or hell.

And his question was:

“There are five of us—so I wanna ask you: Is it possible for one of us to pair up with you?”

“The heck kinda question is that? Hell no. You stupid or something?”

Sora was quite serious, but Foeniculum scoffed at him.

“I’m the host, duh. It’s your job to make me a popular streamer! I need you to make my viewers happy by falling in love on the show so we can reap all the tips!! I’m seriously hoping you kids’ll knock this outta the park, y’know. This’ll kick up my channel to the top in no time! Anyway, there’s a lot I gotta do, so I’ll be off! Toodles!!”

The Fairy rattled off a brief spiel before disappearing with a little poof.

.....,

The group stood there in awe for a good five minutes.

And then—Sora looked at the ever-precarious situation before turning his gaze up to the heavens with a smile.

Ah... So this game will end with two couples—and a single person buying their way out with a key.

That removed the need to leave someone behind—something Sora would've never agreed to anyway.

But there was still an issue:

“...Okay... Let's get, back to...what we were...talking about...”

“Affirmative: We'll be playing for Master's love. I challenge you all. Come at me.”

“It's an incredible honor to challenge Lord Shiro to an actual match—now, let's get started.”

“What?! So it all comes back to this?! I'm pretty sure there are other ways to approach the situation at hand!!”

The girls went back to seeing each other as enemies.

The game that would result in Sora's friends hating him forever was about to start.

He watched as the tension ratcheted up before... That's right:

“NOOO!! I'm just gonna end up alone again like always!!! Somebody get me outta here!”

It was just as he expected:

Two girl-on-girl couples would form.

And Sora would leave alone.

Knowing this was how the game would end, a sobbing Sora cried out in grief...



CHAPTER 1 VERTICAL THINKING

IN THE BOTTOM

As a side note, let it be known that Sora hates death games.
To be more precise: Sora loathes the *premise of death games*.

Death games—an age-old genre of stories centered around a series of survival games.

In these stories, the participants are thrust into situations where they must put their lives on the line to win. Oftentimes, they are kidnapped and wake up in the game. Maybe they're forced to play in order to pay off an insurmountable debt... But whatever the reason may be, the participants need bravery, cunning, and sometimes even a level of derangement in order to make it through the games without losing their lives.

So how do you get out of out these alive? Who do you trust? Who do you trick? Who do you betray?

Death games involve a combination of strategy and wits where the participants are driven into a corner and are constantly looking over their shoulders. There's something fascinating about the way these stories portray the human condition through life-or-death struggles that hinge on the characters' incredible feats of quick-wittedness.

But again, Sora was more focused on the premise.

He wondered: Is there actually a way to *win* games like these?

The answer was clear: NOPE.

That's because there is no winner. Why would there be?

It shouldn't even be a question.

In these outrageous death matches that pit people against each other in a battle of wits, bravery, madness, and whatever other emotions they have to use as weapons, only one person comes out on top—and it's none other than whoever's running the games.

That's right: The operators of the death games—the hosts—are always in control.

How about the example from before, where the participant is kidnapped and forced to play in the games? The operator could easily kill them at any time. And a massive debt? What kind of idiot lends that much money to people who can't pay it back? The only reason the operator lends money to someone like that in the first place is to coerce them into playing their little death game. The participants are the type of people who don't even know how to file for bankruptcy; they're doomed to fail from the very start.

And besides, after doing something so blatantly unlawful, there's no way the hosts just let people go once it's all over.

There was almost always a dead end awaiting whoever made it through the life-and-death challenges thrown at them.

The point is: A death game is nothing short of a death sentence.

Let's say some guy has his head in a guillotine, and the executioner tells him, "Hey, let's play a game. If you can make me laugh, I'll let you live." That's definitely not a game for the guy whose neck is on the literal chopping block. It's nothing other than a way for the executioner to pass the time—a whim. There's no guarantee they'll let the guy live, even if he's hilarious.

...It's already over.

Sora believed games *ended before they began*; there was nothing he hated more than death games.

Whoever controls the flow of the game is the victor—they'll come out on top in the end.

Death games *start* with the game master on top, robbing the player of their ability to affect the flow.

How do you survive being put into a guillotine?

The answer is to never get yourself in that position. That's it.

The only way to win death games is to avoid them at all costs.

The moment you find yourself in one, you've already lost...



"...Okay... Jibril, tell me...everything you know, about Fairies."

Shiro had followed Sora back to their room, where she glanced at one corner and started dejectedly speaking to her smartphone.

She received an answer from outside the room—it was Jibril, who'd been given the siblings' tablet after they'd synced the two devices.

“Ixseed Rank Nine, Fairy, is a race that has been allied with Elf since the Great War.”

You’re telling me there’s such a thing as friendly relations between races in this world?

Shiro was in awe at the startling news. Just then, a voice could be heard from the other side of her door:

“Huh? But I thought most of the Fairies were currently enslaved in Elven Gard?”

“Correct. Approximately sixty percent of the Fairy population are slaves to the Elves—and the whereabouts of their agent plenipotentiary are unknown.” Jibril’s answer to Steph’s question instantly erased Shiro’s awe. *“Fairy is the race of flowers and Elf is the protector of the forest, meaning they are ecologically compatible. Relations between the two races were so friendly that they even developed magic together during the later years of the Great War, although that changed when the war ended, and most of the Fairies were enslaved. They never established an agent plenipotentiary... The particulars of which remain unknown.”*

...Looks like any sort of friendship is just an illusion in this world, after all...

Shiro stared morosely into the distance as Jibril continued her explanation:

“In any case, Fairy follows Rank Seven, Elf, and Rank Eight, Dwarf, in terms of magical aptitude, but what sets them apart is how their magic works. They use their souls to construct a spatial phase boundary such as this one—known as a Spratul.”

There it was again, the idea of a soul. The word never made sense to the siblings.

Come to think of it, doesn’t Plum consume souls for magic...? Now we have to deal with a spatial phase boundary or whatever?

Perhaps Jibril picked up on Shiro’s confusion, for she elaborated:

“A spatial phase boundary is like a subspace of reality. The Fairies are able to use this to build a Linkernet connection—just like the Internet in your world. They provide their network for the Elves to use.”

I see what’s going on here. Foeniculum really was streaming the five of them over the Internet.

She was essentially a Y*utuber.

“Fairies are untouchable inside these Spratul spatial phase boundaries... Though their powers are limited to this space, they can use their souls to create anything at will while within it: air, water...likely even living beings as well.”

“...That’s...some bullshit...”

Not that Shiro would put it past the Ixseed.

She questioned whether the Fairies were *too* over the top, to

which Jibril agreed:

“Indeed, but I should mention that their souls are not without limits. If that Foeniculum girl created a Spratul of this scale on her own—then she shouldn’t have much left of her soul.”

Right.

If Fairy souls were an unlimited reservoir of power, then they’d basically be able to make their own little universes. Of course there were limits.

“Also, Fairies can exchange portions of their souls over the Linkernet as a form of currency.”

—Souls that could be spent to create anything within a Spratul.

So it’s like an all-utility currency.

“Allow me to offer a simpler explanation, Masters. Think of a Spratul as a virtual space built over the Internet—and the souls of Fairies as the data used to modify that space; you might even consider their souls a form of virtual currency.”

Shiro appreciated Jibril’s easy-to-understand explanation and went back to looking through her phone.

“I believe the tips Foeniculum mentioned referred to the transfer of a portion of souls as currency.”

Tips...

Shiro went back to the app where she could see how many tips she had accrued so far.

What started as 15,000 at the end of their first stream was now at 14,900.

The points could be used to buy all sorts of basic necessities. For instance, when Shiro pictured water and tapped the PURCHASE button, a prompt to SPEND 100 POINTS appeared. When she tapped the prompt, a bubble appeared, which then popped, and a two-liter bottle of water materialized out of nowhere.

So one point equaled approximately one yen?

—But what did it all mean?

“Let me get this straight—the viewers are giving us their souls, like they would give spare change to the needy? And to a program as pathetic as this one? Their literal souls? ...Are they out of their minds?”

“Rebuttal: Mutual exchange possible. Souls can be obtained as compensation for labor. Assuming Fairies have some sort of way to increase the volume of souls. They are fluid. Potentially equivalent to Immanity cash.”

Steph was right to question the Fairies’ logic, but Emir-Eins also raised a good point.

“Addendum: Immanity expend their lives working in exchange for money. Fairies convert exchanged souls back into their own life span,

whereas Immanity cannot do the same with money. Their time is irreplaceable.”

—Say...

Does anybody else think this cyborg girl just dropped a giant bomb onto monetary-based economies?

W-well, different races would have different economic structures, right?

Best not to think too much about it.

“...So...I have...uh, three...questions...”

After receiving a general summary, Shiro organized the information at her disposal to make some queries:

“...Question one: Is Elven Gard...behind this...?”

“Answer: Ninety-eight-point-three percent chance yes. However, estimation made based on this space created by the singular unit known as Foeniculum. Were it made by multiple Fairy units, the scale should be much larger. Conclusion uncertain.”

Most of the Fairies were slaves in Elven Gard. Even if you toyed with the idea that Elven Gard wasn’t behind this—according to Emir-Eins, those odds were less than 2 percent, a calculation Shiro agreed with.

“...Question two: Is this...a Fairy game...?”

Each of the races had a *trump card*—either a game they could win against other races or one where they had a clear racial advantage.

So did the Fairy trump card involve trapping people and forcing them into couples?

Jibril was the one to answer Shiro this time.

“I don’t believe so... While the Fairies do have access to a Sanctuary—a massive expanse of flowers—that territory belongs to Elven Gard. There are also no known records of Fairies challenging other races to games.”

Fairy had allied with Elf during the War, but somehow the vast majority of them were now the latter’s slaves.

Were the Fairies ever to challenge another race to a game, it would likely be under the orders of the Elves.

Such an event would never be public knowledge—that much was obvious.

“Since the Fairies can use their souls to change a Spratul at will, it is said they engage in turf wars where they effectively paint over each other’s territories to see who can claim the most space. I’ve never heard of Fairies engaging in a game like this situation we find ourselves in, however.”

Okay... Now, for the biggest question.

“...Question three: Is there, a way...for us to get, out of here...?”

“...There likely isn’t.”

Jibril sounded apologetic, but Shiro had assumed this would be her answer. After all, it seemed only the Fairies could access spatial phase boundaries.

What Jibril said next, however, made Shiro's eyes widen subtly.

"To be more specific: Only Fairies have the ability to access spirit corridors from within a Spratul."

This was why Jibril and Emir-Eins couldn't teleport.

"Even during the Great War, the sole way to attack a spatial phase boundary was to blow the entire subspace out of existence with a massive spell—something that is no longer possible due to the Covenants."

They currently weren't able to use any magic at all, let alone a large-scale spell. The five of them were stuck between a rock and a hard place in the fullest sense of the term.

This also explained why Fairy was able to defeat Flügel and Ex Machina during the War. By luring them into a Spratul, they were able to fully prevent any chances of defeat.

"Negative: Escape possible. Here is a concrete plan. Estimating that the space will be destroyed should its creator perish."

"...Denied... Or more like...we can't."

"Negative: The Covenants prevent harming others. This clause excludes accidents. Suggested course of action: This unit will self-destruct. Should the Fairy unit Foeniculum coincidentally get caught up in the detonation of this unit's spirit reserves, success is feasible. This unit will give her life for Master. Unit's sole wish is for Master to reciprocate this unit's love. Tell me: Je t'aime."

"...Shut up...and stay, in your lane."

"I can also do that. I'll do anything to please my masters. Just tell me to explode, and I'll ask, How fiery? ♪"

"...Stop, trying to compete... Stand down."

With self-destruction being the only solution both a Flügel and an Ex Machina could come up with, things were looking grim.

Racial relations in this world are basically one big rock-paper-scissors game...

Shiro winced. She was almost impressed, but it was time for her to collect her thoughts.

There was only one solution: win the game they had been thrown into.

Upon reaching her initial conclusion again, Shiro apologized to the corner of the room where she sought asylum.

"...Sorry, Brother... I lost, my cool... L-let's just, leave the room,

"kay...?"

Indeed... Usually someone else was in charge of gathering information like this.

After Foeniculum's launch stream, Sora realized his entourage of women no longer liked him. "*Screw you guys! I hate you allll!*" he'd declared before grabbing his sister and shutting himself into their room.

Now he was shaking and crying under his blanket—afraid of even Shiro.



"...Brother... I don't know...what to do..."

Shiro wasn't going to be able to figure this out on her own—she needed her brother.

She did her best to persuade him, but—

"Heh-heh... Oh, my dear sister. The fact that your brother got us into this situation just goes to show he's a useless sack of crap... A loser."

—fully convinced of his inevitable defeat, Sora answered in a heavily distraught tone.

You see—with the Ten Covenants in place, it was virtually impossible for Sora to put himself in a scenario where he could be forced to participate in a flat-out death game like the ones from his own world.

Not to mention the nature of the game he was currently forced into. This could only mean one thing:

They had *already lost some other game*.

What *other explanation was there* for them to end up in a game like this?

And thus, the forever-a-loser no longer had a purpose in life.

Sora lamented his fate, yet Shiro refused to give up on him.

"...B-but...maybe, you agreed to this game, on purpose...? Just like...when we played against...Holou..."

Oh, right.

So there were a few exceptions to the death-game premise he'd thought out earlier.

There were occasionally characters who *chose* to join the death game. They joined with a clear intent—to save someone else who was forced to join. Or perhaps to shove it in the face of the host, the one holding the game.

Such characters *hadn't yet been robbed of the flow of the game* by the game master.

Instead of being forced to participate, they volunteered to get onto the guillotine because they had a strategy to win.

Just like Sora and Shiro's battle with the Old Deus Holou—they had a trick up their sleeve to pull one over on her. They'd opted to lose their memories because they'd believed they could win the death game.

Unfortunately, however, that wasn't the case here. And why was that—?

"There's no friggin' way I'd ever agree to be in a situation like this—it's *literally impossible*... Heh-heh-heh..."

Shiro approached her lamenting brother, when:

"Ngggrah!! How long are ya gonna coop yourselves up in there?! It's almost time for our next stream, don'cha know?!"

The Fairy girl must've run out of patience.

Foeniculum caused Sora and Shiro's locked door to vanish before she started reaming them out. She flew into the room and pulled off the blanket Sora was taking shelter under.

"I'll have you know I had this awesome highlight reel all planned out to show what you guys did on the first day, but nooo, you just sat in your rooms the entire time!! You guys aren't even trying!!"

"Try what?! Why would we try anything in this mess?!" Sora grabbed his blanket back and met her yelling with his own.

"Well, I needja to fall in love with each other and stuff!! Like, you coulda commiserated over getting locked up outta the blue like this, and that could've planted the seeds of romance or somethin'!! You know what I mean, right?!"

"Hell no!! If I could do that, I'd probably have a girlfriend already!!"

"You don't got one 'cause you don't even try!!"

"Yeah, yeah, I don't wanna hear it! You're gonna make me cry, damn it!!"

—Try? Try what, exactly?

"If you don't couple up with somebody, you won't be able to leave or even get enough tips to eat!! Didn'cha hear the rules earlier?! Or do you *actually* wanna die of starvation?!"

"I probably know the rules better than anyone else!! *That's* why I'm depressed!!"

Ah yes, the rules... So: They needed to pair up into couples to leave...

Or they could purchase a key with their smartphones and leave on

their own...

Sure enough—the price of the key showed up as a five followed by *nine zeros*...

Five billion points.

This was the asinine cost of the key.

Only four of them could escape by pairing up into couples. In order to save the final contestant, they would have to buy a key. To do this, they would need to please their viewers—the Fairies—and receive tips.

The only way to please the viewers was—that's right—to show the cast falling in love with each other.

However—there was one big problem standing in Sora's way. And that was:

“I don't even know the first thing about this *love documentary* genre!!”

He had zero clue how to please the viewers and get tips.

His knowledge on the subject was zilch—nada! This was a huge problem_____!

“What kind of system is this?! You think you can just scrounge up a bunch of randos and force them into relationships?! The only love that creates is a product of the process of elimination!!”

Why do people who wash ashore onto deserted islands end up in relationships?

It's simple: Because there's no one else to shack up with.

Why do they go and act like it's the love of the century? And why does that move the viewers to tears? It doesn't make any sense!!

“The only people I can think of who like throwing animals into cages and watching them mate are biologists!! It's freakin' creepy!!”

“You, um, must be *really* unpopular with the ladies to have that take on things.”

“Damn straight, Steph! Any objections? Speak now or forever hold your peace!!”

Steph shuddered at the depths of Sora's unpopularity, but he shot her down and kept the focus on this nonsensical game.

He knew he would absolutely never agree to a death game where he would be the odd man out. Sora was convinced they'd been forced into this game, with no hope for recourse. However...

“I have no objections. My master is indeed wise. You are as sharp as ever.”

“Approval: All mating between living beings can be reduced to the process of elimination. Living creatures can mate only with those close to them. Therefore, it is inevitable that two beings of the same

class and origin will fall in love. As always, Master is all-knowing. Reconfirmation: Considering these circumstances, it is incredible that this unit was able to meet Master, her soul mate. What luck.”

Jibril and Emir-Eins praised Sora, yet he found himself hit with a strange feeling.

Wait... What?

“...Sora, you’re stating the obvious...”

“___What?”

“People only fall in love with those closest to them. If you think that’s strange, then either you think love is strange or you hate when others find love, and—”

“...Brother is the...latter. Basically...he’s just...bitter.”

Steph and Shiro stared unamused at Sora, who was gasping in shock.

Even Steph...is pitying me...

...Heh...heh-heh...

“Yeah... You guys are right... Okay... I’ll come out of my room...”

Sora realized there was nothing wrong with the genre and that he just didn’t understand love in the first place.

But at the very least, the others seemed to have a better grasp of it than he did.

Maybe they would be able to please the viewers in a way he couldn’t—

“If I shut myself in this room, then Shiro will be stuck, too... Right, I’ll come out now... You four, feel free to find love with each other... I’ll just curl up in a corner like some houseplant...”

Indeed... All said and done, Sora knew the outcome would be the same—that he’d end up alone.

In hopes to at least not starve to death, he figured he should allow the others to participate.

With great sorrow, Sora accepted his fate and motioned to leave the room, when—

“ARGH! This is getting us nowhere!! Change of plans, people!!”

Foeniculum had had enough. She tore at her hair while she screamed at the group.

“I had an idea for when things moved too slowly—never thought I’d have to use it on the first day, though. Looks like we’re gonna kick off today’s stream by having you guys play a game!!”

—A game...?

The group shot the Fairy a collective look of hesitation.

“Don’t get your panties in a bunch. Think of this as an easy li’l

mini game.” A cigar in her mouth, Foeniculum gave a fat grin as she continued. “If you guys win, I’ll swear on the Covenants to answer a single yes-or-no question—no matter what it is—truthfully. Them’s the terms of the game.”

“Any question?! You mean even something like, *Is there a different way out of here?!*” Steph asked.

“Yep, yep. I’ll answer any question ya got, as long as it can be answered with a yes or a no.”

—That’s right... Regardless of whether there were *hidden rules*, she would answer any yes-or-no question honestly.

Faced with this new proposal, the group looked each other in the eyes and nodded, and then:

“I’m gonna sit this one out... You four can do it...”

“What?! Wh-why would you opt to sit out?!” Steph demanded.

“Because I *don’t have any questions about this game...*,” came Sora’s lifeless, apathetic answer.

What Foeniculum said next would completely change his mind:

“By the way, I should mention that this game involves *hooking Sora up with one of y’all*, temporarily.”

“Well, ladies, you heard the Fairy!! Moping around isn’t going to get us out of this mess!!”

With enough spring in his step to stir up a hurricane—and quick enough for Jibril not to notice—Sora had burst out of his room.



“Hey, guuuys!! It’s time for stream number two—and I’m here to bring it to you!! ...Okay, see, that whole thing earlier was just a fluke... I—I know! It’s everybody’s favorite li’l shit! Brought to you live from the bottom of the streamer barrel!! Flame me all you want, it’s Foeniculum comin’ atcha with your program! ❀”

It seemed like the viewers had yet to forget about her mishap from the previous day; Foeniculum started off the second stream somewhat apologetically.

Sora and the others, however, were unable to speak at all.

They couldn’t see anything, either. They simply sat at the living room table and listened.

“A-anyhoo, I’ve got a great program for you guys today!! A little something that’ll get the mojo brewing between these five whether they like it or not!! Now, for our first event—I present to you____!!

“The secret confession game!! Whoo-hoooo!! *Bang, bang, sparkle, sparkle!!*”

The Fairy energetically made firecracker sound effects as she presented her event.

Sora and the others listened considerably more attentively than the viewers did.

They hadn't yet been told the details of the game they'd be playing.

Their only instructions had been to sit in their chairs, close their eyes, and listen without saying a word.

Sora and Shiro were seated next to each other—holding hands, eyes closed—as they waited for the explanation.

“I’ve given our contestants cards that show what they’re thinking in writing!”

Sora had his card in his left hand—his opposite hand was holding Shiro’s hand.

“The five of them will write *A loves B* on their cards. *A* has to be someone other than the card owner, and *B* can be anyone—including themselves—except for whoever they chose for *A*!”

Okay...

“For example, Sora here can’t go and write *Sora loves B*. But he can write *A loves Sora*!! And of course he can’t write *Sora loves Sora*. In other words—whoever can match themselves with another player wins!!”

What a sadistic concept for a game...

Foeniculum ignored the group’s inner thoughts and continued with her explanation.

“The pair who writes *A loves B* and *B loves A* will be matched up!! *A* and *B* will be a couple!! We’ll keep going until a couple is formed—and if they get a match on their first try, all five contestants will receive a bonus reward! ❀”

—That made sense, then. The bonus reward was what she described before the stream started. Foeniculum was going to answer one yes-or-no question the group had.

“Contestants, I’ll make sure to keep whatever you write on your cards a secret from the other players while I share it with the viewers.

❀ Since it’s anonymous, feel free to confess to whoever you want!! How’s that sound?!”

...So there’s no way for Foeniculum to lose this game.

“There will be no talking among the contestants before the game begins, either! If any of them speaks or opens their eyes, all five will lose!! That’d make for a pretty boring stream, so don’t go and do that, okay?”

This precluded any methods the group could use to cheat—but there was one more rule.

Foeniculum saved the most important part of the game for last.

“The pair that chooses each other will be forced to become a couple for one day!!”

Oh yeah... The point of this game was to create a couple.

She'd told Sora and the others that before they started—and she was now telling the viewers for their entertainment.

“So let's get this show on the road! Okay, contestants, you have five minutes to think—Aaand go!!”

As soon as she finished yelling her starting call, Foeniculum turned to her viewers.

“In the meantime, I'll be reading out some comments! ♣ *Hello, Foeniculum—why, hello to you, too, Anemone. ♣ —No one wants to hear your shitty banter! ...Heh-heh. Screw you, too! ♣ You can leave whenever you wanna, punk! ...Oh snap, they actually left! I'm just kiddin'! C'mon, I'm beggin' you here!! Don't leeeaaaave meee! ♣*”

While Foeniculum seamlessly transitioned to trading insults within her chat room, Sora closed his eyes—silently laying out the rules in his mind—and sank into deep thought.

The point of the game was to form a pair without discussing it beforehand.

There were sixteen different combinations between the four of them.

That meant a 25 percent chance of forming a couple if they all wrote someone down randomly... Not too shabby, those odds.

However, those were the odds if they each picked someone at random. Reality was more complicated; the players' own thoughts and feelings affected their decisions.

Usually, this sort of game is meant to be played over multiple rounds, where the players feel each other out and adjust their answers accordingly. For Sora and the others to *win*, they needed to make a pair on the first round—in other words, a sudden-death match.

Foeniculum's goal was for two of them to form a couple.

Granted, seeing as she probably *didn't* want to have to answer a question from the group, she intended for the game to last multiple rounds.

Sheesh, there's no skill involved with a game like this. It's basically just luck.

...If you play strictly by the rules, that is.

Thus, Sora couldn't stop himself from smirking as he began moving his fingers around in Shiro's hand.

Did she really think we'd play by the book?

I'm going to write Jibril loves Sora. Shiro, you need to write Sora loves Jibril.

Sora relayed this to his sister with just his fingers.

A few seconds passed, and she responded in a similar fashion: *Got it.*

You see... They certainly couldn't discuss their answers beforehand. They couldn't speak or look at each other's faces.

Magic couldn't be used in this space—there was no way to work with Jibril and Emir-Eins.

However—Sora had Shiro. The two of them could easily overcome the game's rules.

Able to hold each other's hands, they could discuss tomorrow's itinerary if they needed to.

With their two votes, they could create any pair they wanted even with their eyes closed!

That said, Sora was well aware of the risk this game posed.

Forced to be a couple for an entire day... Who knew what it could entail?

Deciding who should be paired with whom required the utmost consideration.

This is why Sora decided to go with Jibril. Even in the worst-case scenario—though, he doubted she'd ever be put in a position to harm him—Jibril would abide by both his and Shiro's commands; she was the least risky option.

Whoever got paired with her, however, was still liable to face some risk.

Therefore, if somebody had to shoulder such a burden—who better than Sora himself?!

Just as Sora affirmed his logical, self-sacrificial decision and mentally patted himself on the back—

“That's five minutes, folks!! I'll be taking those cards now, thaaaank you! 🌸”

—Foeniculum's voice rang out, cutting off his train of thought.

A benevolent, merciful grin spread across Sora's face as he felt the card be lifted from his left hand.

And then:

“What's this? Well, this is a surprise!! Looks like we have ourselves a first-round matchup!!” Foeniculum shouted.

Sora quietly readied his arm for a triumphant fist pump.

Oh, how he had thrown himself into the lion's jaws.

Much as it pained him, this was Sora's way to end the game without getting left in the lurch!!

Any risk that came with his chivalrous decision was worth it for that small glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel!!

His head held high, Sora was certain he'd won this game. And by win, he meant...

My first girlfriend is: Jibril_____!!!!

Welcome to the world, Sora, virgin, age eighteen who's had a girlfriend, even if for just one day.

From today forward, that eternal zero would evolve into a 0.1.

Sora waited with great anticipation as Foeniculum continued her announcement— However...

“Stephanie and Jibril have feelings for each other!! A bit unexpected, but okay!!”

“““ _____WHAT?!”””

All at once, Sora, Jibril, and Steph cried out with shock.

“Hold the goddamn phone! How the *hell* did that even happen?!”

With the creation of a pair, the game had finished.

Sora no longer had any reason to keep his eyes closed or remain silent; he furiously protested the results.

His and Shiro's cards had been ignored. Foeniculum was definitely cheating.

The person who joined Sora in protest was not Shiro, his coconspirator, but:

“Why, you—w-worthless heap of scrap metal—you tricked me! Apparently you wish to die an early death—”

“Scoff: She who was tricked is at fault. This is how the world works. Needless to say, Irregular Number is an idiot. Verification complete, stuuupid.”

Jibril's surroundings practically shimmered from the murderous glare she shot at Emir-Eins.

Emir-Eins...tricked Jibril...?

Wait. Thinking back to when Foeniculum presented the results...

The only ones who sounded shocked were Sora, Jibril, and Steph, as if they didn't know where these results came from.

Sora looked to Shiro and Emir-Eins and asked them, “Hey! What's going on here_____? Ahhhh, sorry; I'm sorry!!”

When he turned his head, he was met with two subzero stares, causing him to whimper midsentence.

Crap, I have no idea what's going on!!

What just happened? And what's going to happen?!

Sora was confused. One thing was for sure, though.

While he didn't know how, he understood his beloved little sister had betrayed him. On the verge of tears, he wondered:

What did I do to piss her off this time...?



Shiro bored holes into Sora with her gaze—like she was putting pins into a specimen—and thought...

Or rather, she couldn't help but think... Her brother, an expert strategist and an absolute doofus when it came to love...

...Could it be...Brother is...a moron...?

Sora seemed incredibly pensive, but—this game was actually incredibly simple.

I mean, come on. Basically—

—all the girls were going to write that Sora loves them... Right...?

All he had to do was pick one of them and write that they love him, and it was over.

And there would be nothing anonymous about it; it would effectively be a confession. Like, *a full-blown confession*.

This is what Foeniculum was getting at... Why didn't Brother realize this...?

So Shiro had simply spoken. Not with her voice, but with her lips.

Brother is going to pair up with Jibril, she mouthed...

Emir-Eins—with her Ex Machina sensors—would be able to pick this up.

She didn't need her eyes to read Shiro's lips. So Shiro continued:

I'll write Steph loves Jibril.

Shiro knew that Emir-Eins—who thought numerically and logically just like she did—would pick up on her intent.

She knew the cyborg would fill in the blanks.

Namely—that she would find a way to keep Jibril from writing *Sora loves Jibril*.

Emir-Eins would probably relay a message to Jibril along the lines of *Little Sister's orders*. *Write* Sora loves Shiro. Then Emir-Eins herself would write *Jibril loves Steph*.

Thus temporarily putting a stop to Jibril's attempts at pairing up with Sora. And—in turn—preventing him from coupling up with Jibril.

All this while fulfilling the group's victory in the first round. It was the only course of action she could take to meet both of her goals—!!

And succeed she did.

However—with her win secured—Shiro turned to Sora and Jibril.

““____Eep?!””

The two whimpered beneath her piercing glare.

Like, in all seriousness—

Brother... If you wanted to secure a win, why not pair up with me...?

Sora loves Shiro, Shiro loves Sora... That would've worked perfectly fine... Right?

Why did you try to make me pair you up with Jibril...?

Same with you, Jibril... You were gonna write Sora loves Jibril, weren't you...?

You definitely would've written yourself in had Emir-Eins not stopped you, I bet... Right...?

“Welp, I guess according to the rules, that makes these two a couple!!”

Fortunately for Sora and Jibril, Foeniculum broke off Shiro's death glare.

“Jibril and Stephanie have to be a couple for the next twenty-four hours, starting—now!!”

With great excitement, Foeniculum pronounced the two women a couple—and at that very moment...

—*Ba-dum*.

...there came the sound of Jibril and Steph meeting each other's gaze and falling in love.

It was perfectly audible—or at least it seemed so to Shiro and the others.



Forced to be a couple for an entire day...

With bated breath, Sora, Shiro, and even Emir-Eins waited to see what this rule entailed.

Were Steph and Jibril really going to fall in love for a day? The siblings and the Ex Machina had no idea what to expect.

The two blushing ladies stared into each other's eyes... Was this what it was like to experience love?

...Wait, *that's it?* Just as Sora began to feel like this was a huge letdown...

“_____♥”

“Eeeek?!”

...Jibril's smile dissolved loosely into the fattest of grins, and Steph's face turned beet red.

Sora had his doubts as to whether these were the expressions of two women in love. That's when Jibril pounced on Steph quickly enough to break the sound barrier—but then...

“Whoopsie daisy!! Let's keep it PG-13, ladies. Wouldn't want to get our stream banned! ♣”

...before Sora could even register what had happened, Foeniculum intervened, canceling out whatever was about to occur.

Jibril flew past Steph and straight into a wall.

Steph, meanwhile, sat clutching herself, teary-eyed and quivering.

Wait—does this mean they were about to do something that would get the stream banned?! What the hell is going on?!

“Um... J-Jibril, are you and Steph in love?” Sora asked cautiously.

“Little Dora and me? In love? Preposterous—Dora is my *pet*,” replied a visibly puzzled Jibril as she rubbed the bump on her head. “It was you, Master, who was gracious enough to let your servant own a pet in the first place. Did you forget?”

Sora and Shiro shot each other a shared look and confirmed that neither of them remembered giving—or even being asked for—such permission.

“I jumped toward her to get her clothes off—pets have no need for those—but it seems I can't do it here for some reason, so I'll let it slide for now. Here, little Dora. Sit. Now give me your paw. ♥”

“O-okay...”

“There, there. That's a good girl, Dora! ♥”

“Urghhh...”

At any rate, it appeared Jibril and Steph mutually acknowledged their relationship.

Though she was blushing, Steph didn't seem to dislike being stroked and ordered around like a dog.

“...Can I, uh...ask something really quick...? How long have you

two been together?”

“Ever since *the day after you and I played our first game together*, Masters. I heard that you forced little Dora to wear a collar, dog ears, and a tail while you walked her around town, and I decided to try it as well. Don’t you just love her reactions? I adore the little face she makes when she’s about to cry—don’t even get me started about when I walk her naked—”

“Jib—erm, *Master*?! You told me you wouldn’t tell anyone about that!!”

“...Oh-ho? Is my pet trying to express her opinion to her master?
♥”

“Eeeep! U-um! I-if you’re going to punish me, please be gentle!!”

Okay, I see what’s going on here.

Evidently, Jibril’s and Steph’s memories had been thoroughly tampered with.

Realizing this, Sora exhaled and said:

“Hey, Foeniculum!! You call this a couple?! You tricked us!”

Jibril and Steph were in no way a conventional couple—they were more like mistress and servant.

Sora accused Foeniculum of breaking the rules, but the Fairy excitedly threw his claim out the window.

“They *are* a couple! A *subconsciously, mutually consenting couple*!!”

If what Foeniculum said was true, it could only mean:

“...So Steph’s...cool with, being...Jibril’s pet?”

Had Steph not felt this way subconsciously, then she and Jibril could never have become a couple.

Shiro asked Foeniculum for confirmation, only to be interrupted:

“N-no way!! I—I’m only doing this because Jibril asked me to... It’s what she wants...”

Steph frantically tried to explain the situation.

“I—I mean, this is Jibril we are talking about! *The* Jibril! Who am I to turn her down?! I’d never find joy in something like this!! Th-this is a, um, regular relationship we—”

“...Dora? Had my masters been addressing you, I wouldn’t mind, but did I give you permission to speak? It looks like somebody still needs more training. ♥”

“Ahhh! I’m so sorry!!”

Sora and Shiro listened as Jibril scolded Steph. There was a clear tinge of jealousy—and possessiveness—that could be heard in Jibril’s tone.

Upon realizing this, they also picked up on a subliminal level of joy in Steph’s voice.

The group came to the same conclusion simultaneously—it all

made sense.

—*They're that kind of couple.*

In other words: “Forced to be a couple for an entire day” only meant that two people were forced to pair up, not fall in love with each other.

The two of them could become a romantic couple so long as they both agreed to the relationship, even unconsciously.

This was the basis of their forged memories; they were *already that kind of couple*.

In which case—Emir-Eins asked the Fairy with utmost caution:

“...Confirmation: When the day ends, their fabricated memory will disappear, correct?”

“Not *quite*. ♪ But they'll know that their memories were tampered with. It'll feel like it was all a dream. And before long, they'll forget about it, just like it actually *was* a dream. ♣”

Even when you date someone you wish you hadn't, you'll always remember them in some way.

Foeniculum's answer sent a collective shiver down Shiro's and Emir-Eins's spines. Sora, on the other hand...

So if I'd paired up with Jibril as planned...I basically would've been able to dream about us becoming a couple in some shape or form!!

Me, who can't even find a girlfriend in his actual dreams!! Who knew these rules could be so wonderful?!

Damn it! Why'd my plan fail?!

Stricken with regret, Sora desperately ruminated over why he'd lost, when next to him:

“Bwa-ha-haaa! The money's flowin' in now! Just look at all these tips! Thanks, everybody! ♣”

Apparently, Jibril and Steph's girl-on-girl action was quite popular.

A thrilled Foeniculum spoke to her viewers through the screen. That was when Sora calmly remembered something.

“...Now that you mention it, is this being broadcast to the Elves as well...?”

Love between an Immanity and a Flügel.

Sora wondered if this turn of events was being broadcast to the world—well, to at least the Elves...

He was conflicted: Let's say he had paired up with Jibril—the last thing he wanted to happen was for Chlammy and Fiel to be watching them.

“Oh, the Elves can’t watch this stream—it’s set to private,” Foeniculum answered. “Fairies have a unique set of spirit corridor junction nerves. They extend through spatial phase boundaries like roots, allowing Fairies to link up with each other—the Linkernet is like a big web of these roots. I’m streaming this directly through those roots. So only Fairies who have subscribed to my channel can watch my stream. ♣”

Right... Not exactly sure I follow her, but now I know what she meant by “private” stream.

Her account was locked—or a direct P2P connection between Fairies.

If that was the case, then...

“...So the Fairies giving you tips are directly connected to you, individually? Like, they’ve subscribed to your channel—as paying customers—in order to watch this stream?”

Not only that, but—like Jibril mentioned before—they were paying with their *souls*.

And indeed, Sora’s smartphone showed these Fairies were sending tips in chunks of 10,000 and 20,000 points.

If the points were worth as much as yen, then that was a lot of money to be throwing around...

Are these Fairies nuts? Sora questioned.

“Heh-heh-heh... Fairies will do anything to watch drama unfold between others; that’s why some went out of their way to become slaves. And we’ve got ourselves a Flügel right here—who isn’t gonna pay to see that? ♣”

“Wait—did you just suggest you *chose* to become slaves?”

Sora had heard that Fairy and Elf were allied during the Great War.

But it was unknown why, at some point, the Fairies became their slaves. Sora couldn’t believe what he’d just heard.

“Hmm? Oh... Elven Gard keeps the Fairies a secret, so I bet you guys don’t know much about us. I’ll hafta teach ya, then!!”

Ignoring Sora’s overt suspicion, Foeniculum continued:

“Fairies crave nothing more than to hear about other people’s love lives!!”

Sora squinted as his suspicions were confirmed. That’s right...

“Those Elves live so long, and yet their romantic exploits are riddled with sex and drama—it’s why their art and *nighttime shenanigans* are so juicy!! Fairy and Elf have been allies since ancient times, and some Fairies have no qualms being Elf slaves—if those Elves provide all the nasty little details. We’re the race of love, created by Alram, the god of love—y’all better not mess with us!!”

Let me get this straight, Sora thought...

So Fairies chose to be enslaved by Elves—or Erofu, as I like to call them—solely for their filthy love lives and art...?

That wasn't the end of it:

"I'll have ya know that the only reason we even created the Linkernet was so we could enjoy watching 'em go at it."

"...So they're using their Internet knowing that they're being watched...?"

"From the Elves' perspective, Fairies are like handy-dandy flowers with built-in web access. They ain't gonna pay attention to every li'l flower they see."

Right. So the Ixseed were even more dismissive of lower races than Sora had imagined.

But anyway... Unable to wrap his head around this new information, Sora couldn't help but moan. "...That's a pretty dumb reason to willingly become their slaves..."

"There's nothin' *dumb* about it. Their drama's like nutrition for us. A literal lifeline," a huffy *Foeniculum* insisted.

Fairy, the flower race, just needs dirt, water, and sunlight to function.

And they can create all three of these in a Spratul—talk about peak eco-friendliness. But in order to use magic, they need to replenish their souls...

"And here's the fun part—to beef up our souls, we feed off other people's romantic escapades. ❀"

Foeniculum continued her spiel, affirming Emir-Eins's earlier suspicions. Namely:

"We need all the juicy drama we can get!! And everything that comes with it: All the bitterness, the melancholy, the glory—everything! The *dirtier*, the better!! 'Cause everybody knows flowers love dirt!! Am I right?! ...Huh? People usually laugh at that part... It's okay to laugh, y'know!!"

Tears filled her eyes; she seemed shocked that her joke fell flat.

Alas, Sora was in no place to hear it. He clutched at his aching head in grief.

"...Even when you consider that, did you guys *really* need to become the Elves' slaves?"

"It's not about *needing* to be their slaves; it was just more *convenient*. Elves and Fairies kinda complement each other."

Right... Sora had heard as much from Jibril, too.

Elf was certainly a better match than Dwarf, who practically uprooted any plant or flower in sight.

But still—there were a plethora of other races to choose from, many who wouldn't force the Fairies into servitude.

"Who else were we 'sposed to pair up with? Not like any of the higher races would give us the time of day. Plus, Dhampir are about to die out, Siren friggin' eat each other, Lunamana are a bunch of antisocial shut-ins, Immanity can't use magic, and Werebeasts make love like animals!! We need quality romance here!"

Now that she mentions it, there aren't a whole lot of races in this world with quote-unquote regular love languages..., Sora grumbled to himself.

But there was something new on his mind he felt he needed to draw attention to.

"Tell me more about that last part. About the Werebeasts—are they all really like Ino when they—?"

"That's right— *It's all in the past now!!* I wanna see love so passionate, so red-hot that it sets the world on fire!!" His question was lost on Foeniculum, who was getting really worked up. "A Fairy's bound to get sick of the same old conservative Elf drama!! We need love that overcomes the barriers of gender and race!! I bet *this'll* be the new standard!! Feast your eyes!!"

Foeniculum plopped on Sora's head as she enthusiastically pointed at the two lovers who had been cuddling the entire time.

Well, not cuddling so much as: Jibril was rubbing Steph's belly like she was a big dog, and Steph—though embarrassed—seemed to be enjoying it.

This was the new standard of love and romance that Foeniculum foresaw.

Sora, who was still stuck on the old standard, couldn't quite grasp her avant-garde view.

He didn't need to agree with her, though, as her viewers gave her their seal of approval with a symphony of *ka-chings*.

It was the sound of their tips coming in, and the cacophony seemed endless...

"Oh yeah, almost forgot. Now that we have a couple, I needta answer a question from you guys."

Ah...right... Sora had completely forgotten about their reward.

Foeniculum was going to answer a yes-or-no question for them.

Honestly, Sora didn't even have a question he wanted to ask.

"I've got about an hour left on the stream, so just wait until that's over, 'kay? ♣"

"...No, I think we're gonna need more than an hour. How about you give us a day...in our rooms...?"

Plus, Steph probably had questions of her own—best to wait until

she and Jibril were back to their usual selves.

With that, Sora turned away from the JibSteph pair, who were getting hotter by the minute.



He returned to his room to escape Shiro's scornful gaze.



Day Three—Nighttime.

“___Whoa?! What the heck was I doing?!”

“Hmm... More like *who* were you—? Uh, actually...”

“...Do you...really, wanna...know...?”

It was the day after the most recent stream. Approximately twenty-two hours had elapsed since Jibril and Steph's forced coupling.

After Steph suddenly reverted to her regular self, Sora and Shiro timidly peeked out of their room and asked her a question.

The siblings figured they had no business in seeing the girl-on-girl—Jibril-on-Steph—shenanigans unfolding.

So they'd gone back to their room before the stream was over and played some games. There was no way for them to know exactly what Jibril and Steph had done, and yet—

“Absolutely not! I *never* want to know what happened!!”

“Report: Full-length audio-visual footage captured of Woman of Unknown Name and Irregular Number. Wanna see, Master?”

“Don't you *dare* show him!! Y-you say something, too, Jibril! That wasn't you in there, right?! We were *forced* into acting that way! It's most certainly not something I'd ever want to do of my own volition! You know that, right?!”

“Yes, we were both under the same spell. I must say, it was quite the tantalizing experience in its own way. ♥”

—judging by those reactions—not to mention the potential progression of the stream—the siblings had an idea of what had transpired.

Truthfully, it was hard for them to picture what exactly the pair had done, since Foeniculum kept things strictly PG-13. Whatever the case was, Sora and Shiro chose to respect Steph's wishes and not prod any further.

However—with another plop on Sora's head—Foeniculum appeared with a nasty grin and her usual off-screen demeanor.

“Geh-heh-heh... Y'all got nothin' to worry about. I have a two-hour highlight reel from that entire day! I pulled an all-nighter to get the editing done! This'll be perfect for tonight—you guys'll get to see it with the rest of our viewers!!”

“You're going to stream us?! This must be some sort of joke! It better be!!”

Sora had a Fairy on his head and a screaming Steph at his side. He thought for a moment.

Honestly, I do wanna see the footage. But I also don't.

Steph-on-Jibril action—this was something Sora would typically like to appreciate with eyes wide open. He'd even like a copy of the video for himself to enjoy later.

At the same time, he would effectively be watching the people around him pair into couples while he was left all alone...

Sora was slightly in denial—but more than anything else, he felt sad.

“...So, Foeniculum...why aren't you participating again?”

If you joined in, I wouldn't end up being the fifth wheel.

I would've been brazen enough to watch the JibSteph action myself.

Sora made no effort to hide his accusatory tone.

“What? Here's the deal—Fairies *don't do romance*,” a puzzled Foeniculum answered. “Us Fairies—we're basically flowers. We reproduce with pollen, so we got no need for love.”

“Hold the phone. You mean to tell me, like...that Fairies have a set of both stamen and pistils?”

“Uh, yeah? What, you wanna see?”

“...Stop, right there... By stamen and pistil...do you mean, like...metaphorically? ...Or literally?”

Shiro squinted with suspicion as she asked the Fairy, but her question seemed to go unheard.

Foeniculum had something much more important on her mind—and she communicated it to them with her usual passion.

“I'll lay it out for ya: Us fairies like *watching*!! We like being the fly on the wall—the flower in the pot—that watches while others have big, fat, passionate love affairs!! Us jumping in on the action? Completely out of the question!! It'd soil all the juicy drama!!”

“If I might add, Master: Fairies fuel their souls with the love of others. If they were able to fuel their souls with their own love, that would make them perpetually self-sufficient...and that would be quite nonsensical.”

“You're the last person we need calling BS on other races.”

Flügel were the same in that regard: They didn't need love for procreation. It wasn't a reason to never experience love... If anything, there might just be certain racial limits.

Either way, Sora let out a sigh as he accepted their assertions and submitted to this philosophical notion.

“___And? Since we're all here—I think now's as good a time as ever for your question.”

Foeniculum wanted to answer their question before the next stream, which was going to start soon.

Sora had the same answer as before, though.

“Well, I don’t really have a question for you...”

“I do!! Let’s ask her if there’s a way to get out of here—or for more details about the situation we’re in!”

“Then you go ahead and ask, Steph...”

“Do you think I’ll be able to get any pertinent information out of her with just a yes or a no?!”

Steph stood proud in her assertion that she was incapable. Sora lamented to himself.

Ugh... I don't have any actual questions, though.

But if he had to ask something, it wasn’t so much a question as a confirmation:

“...Okay, let me ask *you* something, then, Steph.”

“What? Me?”

“Do you wear those clothes to sleep?”

“Huh? Well, no, I wear pajamas... Oh, if you’re talking about the pajamas I bought after coming here, don’t go thinking I wasted money on them!! I bought cheap ones, and—”

Steph made excuses for herself, but that wasn’t what Sora was interested in.

“That’s what I thought. You’d never sleep with all those accessories; they’d poke you in your sleep. Now, look at Shiro and me. We have our phones, tablets, and games. There’s *one important thing*, though, that we’re missing.”

The lack of a certain article of theirs didn’t warrant a question.

“So just checking here... Foeniculum—”

“—Shiro and I are *no longer the monarch of Elkia*—right?”

“Yes...that’s correct.”

Foeniculum’s answer caused Steph, Jibril, Emir-Eins—and even Shiro—to open their eyes wide in shock.

“Oops, almost time for the stream!! I’m gonna be watching the highlight reel with the viewers and taking comments, so you guys can chill out for the day!! Next game will start at eight o’clock tomorrow night—wait here and don’t be late! I’ll be back in two hours!! Adios!!”

Foeniculum rattled off her good-byes before *poofing* away.

And then:

“Wait, what, huh?! Wh-wh-what is the meaning of this?!”

Steph acted as the representative for the group as she walked up and practically screamed at Sora in shock and horror.

It is what it is... Sora was down in the dumps, back at square one.

"I ignored it earlier because I was still half asleep, but Shiro and I don't have our crowns..."

Sora wore his on his arm, and Shiro used hers as a hairpin. They were both missing.

Realizing this, Steph and the others began frantically searching the room for the missing crowns, but Sora ignored them and said:

"I take mine off before I go to bed, so I figured maybe it was back at the castle, but I knew something was off when I saw you in your usual getup, Steph. And it's not like I usually sleep with all my devices in my arms, either."

Therefore:

"...When we woke up, the game had already started—and our belongings were transported here with us. Our crowns weren't included in our belongings—the only logical conclusion is that we *lost the Elkia throne*."

"What—? Huh—wait just a second. Isn't that a gigantic problem?!"

"Yeah, it's a huge problem."

Something big definitely happened during the gap in their memories.

But what was it? Steph and the others asked Sora with their eyes, but he could only shake his head.

"I don't have any ideas beyond that. Most likely our memories got erased so that we *wouldn't know anything else*."

"...Master, what do you mean by that...?"

Jibril, Steph, and Emir-Eins all stared at Sora, begging for an explanation.

Truthfully, Sora was quite down about it as well.

Having to explain what he already knew was, well, quite a dismal position to be in for him.

As much as he wanted to sigh and return to his room—

"Brother...?"

—he couldn't ignore his little sister's gaze. He still sighed, then continued where he left off.

".....Shiro, what's your last memory from before we were locked away in here?"

"...When...Emir-Eins, got left in Elkia...I think?"

That's right: Ex Machina had paid a sudden visit to Elkia—to see Sora.

They departed after a brief kerfuffle, leaving only Emir-Eins

behind... This was Sora's final memory as well: He nodded quietly as he noticed Steph, Jibril, and Emir-Eins doing the same.

However, this didn't necessarily mean they had all their memories up to that point. And that was because:

"Yeah. I think our memories might've been altered from somewhere *before* then, too."

The four ladies gazed wide-eyed at Sora as he took out his smartphone to show them what he meant.

"This is my scheduling app. It's unnaturally blank for a period before the Ex Machina came."

Whenever Sora schemed, he always made sure to record his ideas into his scheduler.

The problem was—there were large blank sections in spots where he should still remember things.

He had no idea what he'd planned for those periods. They'd been erased from his memories.

But there was never a day when Sora and Shiro didn't write down their plans.

Not only were their memories missing, but any record they had of making plans was filled with holes like a sweater in a moth-infested drawer—plus:

"They've messed with our phones as well, so it's hard to know whether the date on the screen is correct—but it says it's been thirty-nine days since Emir-Eins stayed behind in Elkia with us."

"...Affirmative: Internal observation equipment matches with this timeline."

Emir-Eins agreed that thirty-nine days had indeed passed: There was no way the siblings had been sleeping that entire time.

Therefore—the conclusion was simple. This all meant:

"Due to something we were planning since before the Ex Machina showed up, we were chased out of the kingdom, and—"

This was a big *and*...

"—we made some kind of mistake and...lost. That's why we're here."

Lost...?

Sora and Shiro...lost? Did Blank really lose?

Steph, Jibril—and even Emir-Eins—heard the words leave Sora's mouth but stared blankly, unable to process them.

Sora wanted this conversation to end—so he repeated himself to press the conclusion.

"Do you need me to spell it out for you? Someone eliminated all our memories and records so that we'll never be able to know the

truth, and now we've been thrown into a game we can *never win*—that's where we are right now."

"—What? What do you mean by *a game we can never win...*?" Steph asked.

It all began to make sense. The group's memories had been thoroughly erased, so that they could never figure out what happened.

But why did this mean that Sora thought the game they were playing was unwinnable?

Sora could tell by their gazes that Steph and the others thought it was a bit of a leap in logic, but—

"...If you really wanna know, I'll get the answer out of Foeniculum for our next question."

Sora had no more energy after the exchange. He slumped over as he left the group with these words.

According to Foeniculum, they would be playing another game the next day.

It was likely something to help prop the five into new couples in exchange for another yes-or-no question.

So they could use their next question—which was more like a confirmation—to get all the information they needed to know.

What's more: Another game was another chance for Sora to couple up with someone.

"Hey, I'm gonna hole up in my room for the rest of the night... See ya tomorrow..."

Steph, Jibril, and Emir-Eins watched helplessly as Sora—along with his sister—returned to their room.



Day Four—Evening.

It was not yet eight o'clock, when Foeniculum had their next game scheduled. Lured by a delicious smell, Sora and Shiro poked their heads out of their room.

The living room had changed quite a bit since they'd last seen it the night before.

"Oh, Sora and Shiro. Perfect timing. I was just about to go get you two."

Standing in the now dine-in kitchen was a smiling Steph, and she was cooking.

There was a table, silverware, and various cooking utensils... It was actually starting to look like a home. The siblings knew she

must've procured these with their tip money using the tablet they'd left with Jibril.

"St-Steph, d-did you spend my key fund on this...?!" Sora couldn't help but cry out. He was convinced he'd be the one buying a key to get out of there.

Wh-what does she think she's spending all this money on?!

We can literally just eat bread!! Sora lamented to himself, when—

"There's no need to worry; I've calculated it all out, and this will actually save us money."

—Steph retorted proudly.

"If we're going to spend longer than a week here, then instead of buying water and prepared food every time we need to eat or drink, we can make a well in the garden and use basic utensils to prepare our own meals. It's much cheaper this way."

O-oh... Huh.

Sora looked at the tip counter on his smartphone app and internally acknowledged Steph's culinary prowess.

Even though Steph bought ingredients and remodeled their entire living room, their counter was at 1,871,000 points—down from 1,984,000 after last night's stream. They'd acquired a stable supply of water and a week's worth of food for just a bit over one hundred thousand.

It was more than evident that Steph knew what she was doing when it came to handling money—and moreover, when it came to living in the real world, a department the gamer siblings were lacking severely in experience.

Acquiescing to this, Sora and Shiro sat at the table. They were greeted with two plates of food.

"A weak mind starts with a weak body! I'll see to it that you two eat properly. Though, it's not much... We could only afford the bare minimum in ingredients and seasoning; nothing fancy..."

Steph finished with an apologetic look, but her spread told a different story. There was rice, a main dish, a side dish, and even a small dessert.

For the past four days—actually, for most of their lives—the siblings had subsisted on white bread, instant noodles, and C*lorieMate blocks. This spread looked like a genuine smorgasbord to Sora and Shiro.

They figured they might as well eat it right up. They grabbed their knives and forks, when—

"Oh my... I can't help but notice you've set five plates, Dora."

"Well, of course. These two are for you and Emir-Eins."

“Rejection: This unit does not require food to survive. Such morsels are vital for our masters’ health. Meaningless waste.”

Jibril and Emir-Eins gained sustenance via spirit energy.

The two of them didn’t need to eat, but with a smile, Steph gave her retort.

“You needn’t worry about waste. I knew you would say something like that—so I’ve prepared modest portions for you two using the scraps from our dishes. I have tea for Jibril, and I’ve heard that you like coffee, Emir-Eins.”

True, they didn’t *need* to eat, but they were still capable of doing so. What’s more:

“Good food is like nutrition for your heart. If you two have hearts, then you need to eat. If you’re not going to eat with us—well, I’ll have you know it’s bad for *our* hearts if the three of us eat while you just watch. ♪”

Granted...while Steph was the worst of the five at gaming by a long shot, when it came to domestic matters, she refused to let anyone else get a word in edgewise. *What is she, our mother?* thought Jibril and Emir-Eins as they begrudgingly sat down to eat.

“...Staaare.”

“...Is there something on my face, little Dora?”

“Oh, no... While I am admittedly forcing you to eat this... Seeing as I was limited with what ingredients I could buy... I was just curious what you thought about...the taste...”

“...Sigh. Well... It’s edible... I suppose?”

“! That’s fantastic!”

...Meanwhile, Sora and Shiro ate silently during the exchange.
Nom, nom.

“...I’ve always wondered this, but weren’t you technically royalty, little Dora?”

“I still am royalty, and there’s nothing technical about it!!”

“You shouldn’t have ever needed to prepare your own food, so why are you so good at cooking?”

“Huh? Ah... When I was a child, I made some treats for my grandfather, which he complimented me on.”

...*Nom, nom.*

“I started making him different things, and before I knew it, cooking became a hobby of mine. The ladies-in-waiting were my teachers... Although, they used to tell me *A princess doesn’t belong in a kitchen* all the time. Hee-hee.”

“Is that so...? My, this tea is wonderful.”

...*Nom, nom. Gulp. Wow... That was good.*

Sora finished his meal, politely put down his silverware, and—

.....Now, then...

—waited for the most opportune moment to...sob.

“WAHHHHH! SHIROOOO!! THIS DAMN COUPLE IS KILLING ME HERE!!”

“What?! What couple?! Where?!” Steph hollered.

“Nay, extrovert! I see through your thin veil of feigned ignorance!! You may have thought you could pull the wool over the eyes of an introvert, but it shan’t work on I!! The two of you are oozing with an anxious albeit warm aura—something seen only in the honeymoon phase of coupling!!”

Make no mistake: Their aura was blinding—so much that it made others hold their tongues!

Just like the aura from those kids in class who start dating in secret!!

Though Sora knew absolutely nothing about love, he wasn’t so oblivious to not pick up on this.

It’s a silent aura that scorns all onlookers—quietly screaming *Mind ya own business!!*

“Alas!! You two relish in the haughty warmth provided by such an aura—all without even sparing a thought for those like me who shiver in the chill of solitude beneath a blanket of vanity and resignation in our insistence that we neither need nor can ever obtain a significant other!!!! BEGONE, HAPPY COUPLE! REMOVE THYSELVES FROM MY PRESENCE THIS INSTANT!!”

“...Brother...shut up...”

“GRAGH! Wahhh... I haaate this... I’m just gonna curl up and die... Maybe I’ll serve a purpose when I decompose into soil...”

Sora had buckled onto the floor after getting punched in the stomach. Shiro gave a pointed stare.

“...It’s been, way longer...than one day...right?”

“Affirmative: Twenty-four hours passed at eight forty-three PM last night. Another nineteen hours and twenty-three minutes have passed since then.”

“...Then why, are Steph and Jibril...still a couple...?”

“Whaaat?! Jibril and me?! A couple?! We’re back to normal already!”

“Yes, Lord Shiro. I won’t deny we showed you ourselves at our worst after the game ended, but we are already—”

“Negative: Zero confirmation of Irregular Number ever showing signs of interest in Woman of Unknown Name. Likewise for compliments regarding Woman of Unknown Name’s cooking. Report:

Feelings detected between Irregular Number and Woman of Unknown Name.”

“I told you: There’s *nothing* between us!!”

“Command: Silence. This is an urgent matter of high importance. The Fairy’s claim of a singular day of forced love may be dubious. Request: Answer this promptly: Are the two of you clinically sane?”

““ ____!””

Steph and Jibril gasped in unison at Emir-Eins’s question, when—

“Oh? Did I forget to tell you guys? Sorry ’bout that.”

—a Fairy happily smoking a cigar appeared out of thin air to answer the Ex Machina.

“Whoo-hoo! Thanks to you two, our viewership is through the roof! I’ll be one of the top streamers in no time at this rate! So as a reward, I’ll answer your question!”

Foeniculum continued with a grin:

“This space I made works to *increase love between two people as time goes on.*”

———,

“There needs to be *some* existing love for this to work, though. You can’t create something from nothing, after all. But you see, even a day of forced love is enough to create that very something—more than enough to turn a zero into a one. And once you have ‘one,’ it’s only a matter of time before it becomes two, then three, and...the rest is history! How much longer can you guys deny your love for each other? Now *that’s* a sight worth seeing!”

The four ladies looked at Foeniculum in fear, like she was the grim reaper about to swing her scythe. They let out a collective internal scream:

So this was the Fairy’s goal all along!!

The secret confession game they played before had been way too easy.

No lasting love would be born from such a short-lived coupling!

However—there were hidden goals behind that single day of love!!

It likely wasn’t the last game they’d play that paired two of them up—that would effectively lay the seed for a real couple to be born. It didn’t take into account the group’s own feelings!!

How did I not pick up on this?! I shouldn’t have been so naive!!

It’s not a space that only couples can leave—it’s a space that forces you into a couple against your will!!

Foeniculum didn’t give a rat’s ass about their feelings—*this unit’s*

feelings for Master; my feelings for Sora; my feelings for Master; my feelings for Brother!!

The four ladies felt a long, cold shudder run down their spines. Meanwhile, the direness of the situation seemed to fly over their male companion's head.

"S-so there's still a chance I can come out of this with a girlfriend?!"

The virgin—whose IQ fell into the single digits when it came to love—looked at the Fairy, his eyes shimmering with hope.

"So with that outta the way...it's time for today's game! We'll be playing with new rules this time, but the stakes are the same. Y'all get to ask a freebie if you win. And to win, you just need a single, one-off couple to form—you guys up for it? Why *wouldn't* you be?!"

"You bet we are!! We need to ask you more questions, after all!! Right, guys?!"

Sora, hyperventilating with excitement, agreed to the terms, but the ladies were still trying to collect their thoughts.

This set a new pretense for the game as opposed to the one they played two days before.

They didn't mind being coupled up—if it was going to last only a day.

But if that single day of being a couple would stand to blossom into a long-term relationship, now that was a different story altogether. None of the girls wanted to pair with each other—only with Sora.

It went without saying that if one of them went after Sora, then the other three would do everything in their power to stop her!

Not only that—they also needed to pair up the other two ladies while they went for Sora...

This was truly a mind game of the highest caliber!!

"...Jibril... I have an...order for—"

"Obstruction: Assertion of Irregular Number's individual rights. Stripping her of those is bad. That's cheating, Little Sister."

"...To think the day would come when I owe this scrap heap my thanks... My apologies, Lord Shiro."

"Oh, I see what's going on here. You're all going to team up against me!!" said Steph. "Bring it on!!! I refuse to be the eternal loser!!"

It was more than evident that Sora was out of sync with the rest of his group.

With a new, cutthroat premise, the team began the fourth day's game...

■ ■ ■

And then, Day Five—Nighttime.

Sora and Shiro had waited a day after last night's simple coin guessing game ended before leaving their room.

"...All right," Sora began, "I wasn't gonna ask, but I figure I might as well: What happened?"

"Nothing! Nothing whatsoever!! Everything is just peachy!!"

Despite her insistence otherwise, something was clearly up with Steph, who rounded on Jibril and Emir-Eins.

"Report: Woman of Unknown Name interrogated us. Presumed angry and jealous that, despite having good relations with Irregular Number yesterday, Irregular Number and this unit are now a couple. Much to this unit's chagrin."

"I already told you, I'm perfectly fine the way things are!! Jibril can get together with whomever she pleases!!"

Last night, they had played a guessing game with a coin. There was no real strategy involved, and naturally, Sora was single for another night—while Jibril and Emir-Eins ended up becoming a couple for a day.

Jibril and Emir-Eins—a Flügel and an Ex Machina, the definition of sworn enemies—were forced to be a couple.

According to the rules, they formed a relationship they could both rationalize subconsciously. No one thought this coupling would be even remotely possible, and yet it was—and in the most unexpected way, too.

"Could you please leave us be, little Dora? I was merely ordered by Master to hug this heap of scrap metal. During the time we spent as a forced couple, there wasn't a single moment where I felt any feelings—not even a sense of camaraderie—toward it, nor do I plan on ever having them."

"Affirmative: This act is to please *Master* only. The premise of this embrace is this unit's love for Master."

Evidently, their memories had been reworked so that Sora had ordered the two to embrace each other.

For Jibril, she was simply ordered to do so by Sora.

For Emir-Eins, she was told by Sora that hugging Jibril would float his boat.

With this as their pretense, the Flügel and Ex Machina couple would go down in history as the first of its kind.

"Observation: Pleasure detected in Irregular Number as she hugs

this unit. So gross.”

“I’ll admit that I felt a hard-to-describe sense of disgrace when Master ordered me to embrace *garbage*... But please refrain from overstepping your boundaries. You wouldn’t want me to accidentally destroy you now, would you? ♪”

The two detested each other as much as usual, but Steph continued reprimanding them:

“Then, do you mind explaining why you two are still holding hands?!”

““_____?!””

The pair had long since returned to their usual selves, and yet...

Even with Steph in their faces, they never let go of each other’s hands.

Until she pointed this out to them, that is—but it was already too late.

“...I, get it... At first...you did it, for your master...and hated it... but then you, were...actually into it...and before long...doing it, *for your master*...became nothing more, than an excuse...”

“Waaait, Shiro. Where’d you learn about that scenario...? Uh, actually, n-never mind. You don’t need to say it.”

This wasn’t the type of logic you see in a nice, wholesome manga... It was more like something out of her *brother’s* magazines.

Sora almost asked his sister to explain but quickly chalked it up to something she probably saw in some shoujo manga. Yeah, let’s go with that.

Anyway, it went without saying that Sora was familiar with this plot device as well.

This raised a new—albeit microscopic—red flag.

His route for getting together with either Jibril or Emir-Eins was on its way to disappearing. The only route left was the one he was paving to hell—no, it was more like laying track for a bullet train at this point—which brought tears to Sora’s eyes.

“Master, I implore you: Please order me to lose my memories of the past day.”

Jibril knelt before the teary-eyed Sora, her hands together in supplication and her head bowed low.

“If there really is a chance—even a fraction of one—that I’ll fall in love with this industrial waste, I beg you, please erase my memory before time can work to expand these feelings, or—”



With a cheerful smile, as if she was saying good-bye to an old friend, Jibril finished:

“—if you cannot do that, then please end my life.”

“Execution: Initiating memory-wipe sequence. Error. Initiating self-destruct sequence.”

Jibril and Emir-Eins—sort of agreeing in a way—were more or less on the same wavelength, when:

“Oh, my bad! Forgot to mention—you can’t tamper with your memories or hurt yourselves here.”

As always, Foeniculum abruptly appeared out of nothingness.

“You guys don’t have any say in changing your memories; this is something we decided at the beginning of the game. Don’t be mad at me, ’kay? ♪”

Jibril and Emir-Eins turned pale with despair upon hearing the news.

Sora, on the other hand, grew distraught—another one of his suspicions was affirmed.

Foeniculum, as cheerfully as ever, continued:

“Who’d wanna put a stop to some Flügel-Ex Machina romance anyway?! Do you have any idea how incredible a hook it is?! We can’t have you wiping your memories!! This ain’t a joke!! You guys need to lean into this love! Go big or go home, y’know what I’m sayin’?! Geh-heh-heh-heh!”

She finished with a vulgar laugh to match her smile.

“Look, I got tonight’s stream coming up. So are you guys gonna hit me with a question or what?”

Just like two days before, she was probably going to show her viewers another highlight reel.

Foeniculum was acting especially impatient, which the group took to mean she wasn’t yet finished editing the JibEm footage.

“.....”

Steph, Jibril, Emir-Eins—and even Shiro—all shot Sora a shared look.

A mere two nights ago, he’d declared this game impossible to win. Sora said he’d make that clear in the next question-and-answer session. He chose to repeat himself.

“Like I said... I don’t really have any questions...”

Therefore, he wasn’t asking a question but seeking a confirmation of what he believed to be true.

Sora exhaled deeply before saying:

“My question is: *We can't win this game no matter what we do... Right?*”

“What?! Huh? Wait... What do you mean by that?!”

There was a long silence before Steph took the initiative to break it.

With a defeated look about him, Sora explained to the group how this game really worked.

“I’ll spell it out for you... To start off: *There’s no way for us to escape this game.*”

No—that’s not right. Sora shook his head and spoke again.

“Let me rephrase that... It’s really easy to escape from here—all you need to do is hold hands with your proclaimed significant other and cross through the gate. That’s *too* easy. We could just form consensual couples by the Covenants for four of us to escape. That’s the problem, though—it’d only work for four of us.”

No matter which way they sliced it, a fifth member would have to stay behind.

“Whoever’s left behind can’t fall in love with anyone, and that means they won’t earn any tips on their own.”

Four people leaving the space would also throw a wrench in Foeniculum’s plans.

It’d bring an end to the stream—and any tips it brought in. Kaput.

“So first we gotta get a key. The only way to do that is to amass an exorbitant number of points—five billion, to be precise. We good so far?”

“Y-yes... But you knew this before we even started, right?”

Steph was correct—Sora was onto this fact from the get-go.

Everything he was about to explain contained circumstances he was fully aware of. Hence why he’d been so depressed the entire time. In other words:

“However... There’s no way we’re ever gonna raise five billion points.”

They’d raised 8,970,000 points in tips over the past five days. It would take years for them to reach five billion at this rate. Not only that:

“In fact, a group that can raise five billion...can also raise six, even ten billion. Who’s gonna let a golden goose like that fly the coop?”

“_____”

The conclusion was simple.

“Foeniculum has *no intention* of ever letting us out of here.”

“...B-but...Brother... There’s, no way...we’d ever agree to—”

Shiro was right. Their memories had been erased, so they couldn’t possibly know the truth.

What Sora did know: There was zero chance he’d ever agree to be locked away under conditions like these.

“There’s only one answer—and that’s *we lost*. That’s how we ended up here.”

Elven Gard was the most probable culprit.

The siblings must have lost to them, been removed from the throne, and been thrown into this situation...

In other words, this game was the *punishment*, the terms they had to fill for their earlier loss.

Therefore: Sora asked—read: confirmed—one other thing.

“Just think back to when she explained the rules. Foeniculum only ever described our way *out of here*—she never mentioned a way we could *win*... Why do you think that was? It’s because there’s *no way for us to win*.”

“.....”

A space that only couples can leave.

That only mentions leaving this space: this Spratul.

It doesn’t mention what’s outside this space; it might even be another Spratul...

It wasn’t possible to save up five billion points, and even if it was, Foeniculum had no reason to ever let the five escape.

Even if the group was to sacrifice one of its members and get out of the Spratul, all that awaited on the outside was their overall defeat.

Which brings us back to the beginning—this is a death game.

There was no victory for the group; they’d lost the moment they participated.

They were only there because they lost in the first place. This was just some entertainment before the guillotine met their necks.

...If the guillotine really was going to fall; if this really was their end...

...then the most Sora could ever wish for was to have a girlfriend before it was all over...

A teary-eyed Sora looked off in the distance—but this was when Foeniculum hit him with an unexpected answer:

“___Nope.”

.....

_____.....

_____.....*Come again?*

“I’ll say it as many times as ya need me to. I swear on the Covenants—the answer to your question is *no*.”

She stopped her video editing and met Sora’s eyes—they were as dark as the night.

Foeniculum looked straight into his eyes as she answered him. Her eyes were lime-colored; Sora stared back at her wide-eyed when he noticed—

“...Welp, it’s almost time for the next stream. I’mma zoom on outta here!! Your next game is scheduled for eight PM tomorrow—don’t be late, ’kay? See ya!”

Foeniculum disappeared with a *poof* and a smile—the way she always did—leaving the party behind.

There was a brief period of bewilderment before the four female members eventually turned their attention to Sora, who was in the fetal position and biting his nails.

“...Brother?”

“...Uh, wait... Shiro... I need time to think...”

Hooold on. Whoa, whoa, whoa... What just happened? Did she say... no? So there’s a way for us to win this...?

Well, that changes everything—

“...Sorry. After that whole speech I gave, it looks like I was wrong about everything. I need to clear my mind and think this through a bit,” Sora mumbled to the girls, who silently watched as he brought Shiro back to their room.

No way... No frickin’ way. Is that really what’s going on here?



Day Seven___Nighttime.

The group participated in another game the day after Sora learned he’d misread the entire situation.

Another day had passed since that game, bringing the group to their seventh night in the Spratul.

Sora and Shiro left their quarters, only to witness some intense carnage in the living room.

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you! I was forced to do what I did

last night; it was against my will!!”

“Oh, is that so? ♪ You don’t have to explain yourself to me. You were on my case two days ago, but it looks like you’re quite friendly with that lump of garbage now. My only wish is for you to bring it out with you to be collected for disposal. ♪”

“Vindication: Free will is not observed during the forced-couple period. Irregular Number and this unit have already proven this concept. No legitimacy between Lady Dol and this unit. Assuming Irregular Number is jealous of this unit. How unsightly.”

“...Wait a moment—by *Lady Dol*, are you referring to me?”

“Goodness, she’s right. What happened to Woman of Unknown Name? Is this some sort of pet name? ♥”

“Deliberation: Negative. Fact: This unit knows Stephanie Dol’s name. Therefore, all prior reference as Woman of Unknown Name has been an error. Error has been merely corrected. No affection involved.”

“You’re literally one letter away!! I’m Stephanie Dol—”

“Conclusion: This unit is still her master’s maid. The aforementioned female is his close associate and the chief minister of the Commonwealth of Elkia. Therefore, she is of higher social status than this unit. Thus, it is only suitable for this unit to refer to Stephanie Dol as Lady Dol. This unit is in the right. She loves her master.”

“Whyyyyy does everyone insist on calling me by the wrong names?!”

The group had played another simple psychological game the night before.

Steph and Emir-Eins had emerged as the couple from that stream.

The moment Sora had the chance to ask another question, he left the game with Shiro at his side to retire to their quarters for the day. He had no idea what happened after he left, especially between the new couple—he was in no place to even think about it.

Setting aside the love triangle that their games had forcibly manufactured, Sora had spent the last twenty-four hours racking his brain as hard as he possibly could...

“Hmmm... We’ve gotten more viewers, and tips ain’t looking too bad...but it seems like the Flügel-on-Ex Machina pair had more impact. The problem is Stephanie: You’re too easily won over, and that’s killing the whole vibe. Gawd, we gotta do something to get this shindig going, otherwise we’re up shit’s creek!”

With a cigar in one hand and a drink in the other, a strangely

irritated Foeniculum gave it to them straight.

“...Foeniculum: It’s time for our question.”

The others must have sensed something in Sora’s voice, in his expression, in his eyes.

Foeniculum and the girls—along with the Steph-centric pandemonium—stopped and turned their attention to Sora.

_____He’d thought it over for two nights.

The only conclusions he was able to come up with were that their memories were erased and that rules had been set to make sure they couldn’t recover them.

He just couldn’t figure out why their memories would be erased to this extent or why they’d agree to restrictions like these.

Therefore, this situation could only have stemmed from a different loss—a mistake they’d made.

Sora knew for a fact that, at the very least, they’d never cede this much power over the flow of the game to an opponent.

Despite that—there remained a path to victory. If there really was an answer to all this that couldn’t be reached with preconceived notions—then...

“FYI...this isn’t a question. I’m just confirming what I know. So you don’t need to answer me.”

...Sora decided to rely on his *usual methodology*.

Namely:

“Foeniculum—you’re on *our side*, aren’t you?”

I don’t have any proof, but my gut says she’s not our enemy.

“_____❀”

Foeniculum followed his wishes and remained silent, answering him with only an expressionless gaze.

Her lime-colored eyes, however—they were just as Sora had seen them two days prior. They were absent of ill intent; they lacked even a tinge of animosity or malice.

The only emotions her gaze showed were anticipation, trust—and anxiety.

Able to confirm what he felt instinctually from their shared gaze, Sora decided to ask his question.

“Here’s our question: You’re participating in this game with us—and your conditions to win are *the same as ours*, right?”

Foeniculum was no executioner.

She was definitely the host of the stream, but still—if anything, she could be the *final example* of winnable death games...

—When the game master and the players are in cahoots...

This was Sora's instinctual conclusion, and the answer was:

“—Yes, that's right. ♣”

Foeniculum replied with the boldest of grins, to which Sora gave a wry chuckle.

“Oh...well... Sorry it took us so long to figure it out. We're finally on the same page.”

“Um... Would you mind filling us in?”

Steph stepped forward to request an explanation for the group. Sora began scratching his head in self-reflection.

He couldn't believe how much he'd lost sight of himself—this conclusion should've been easy to reach had he been more levelheaded. That's right:

“Okay, so this proves Foeniculum is *not working for Elven Gard*.”

She mentioned that Fairies are addicted to Elf drama. That some even willingly become slaves to get their fix—but she said all this like it wasn't her business. My biggest hint was—I've never felt an ounce of ill intent from her.

However: If Foeniculum really was on their side, then why did they have to lose their memories to this extent?

For them to be thrown into a situation this overly dire—the only conclusion was that they were *forced into it*.

“So we messed up somewhere along the line and lost. Probably to Elven Gard.”

Whether it was to Elven Gard or not—Sora couldn't be sure.

But they'd lost to *someone* in order to find themselves in the situation at hand. That much he wouldn't budge on.

However, despite the direness of their circumstances, if there really was a path to victory—if Foeniculum really was on their side—then...

“This means...in order to make a comeback, we swallowed these incredibly difficult terms and agreed to play this game with Foeniculum.”

This posed the question: *What if our host has the same terms of victory as we do?*

There was only one logical answer. If Foeniculum really was on their side—then the only way out of this game was what she'd explained to them at the very beginning.

Namely: Make as much bank as possible.

Otherwise, in order to escape with all five of them intact, they

needed to purchase a key.

We really do need to raise five billion in tips—it's our only shot at victory.

“...Um... I think I might be missing something here. So we still don't know any of the important details? Like what our mistake was or who we lost to...?”

Steph sounded doubtful—but she wasn't alone: Jibril, Emir-Eins, and Shiro appeared to reciprocate her sentiment.

The four of them stared at Sora, bewildered. He responded by shaking his head.

The details Steph brought up weren't actually that important. Quite frankly, Sora couldn't care less about them.

He simply—

“Right, Foeniculum. Mind if I ask another question for Steph and the girls?”

“Hmm? You only get one question. I can't guarantee you'll get a straight answer outta me this time.”

Foeniculum was no longer bound by the Covenants to answer him honestly.

She *went out of her way to make sure he knew that*, causing Sora to smirk as he responded, “Nah, I'm pretty sure we can trust you, seeing as we're on the same team.”

This Fairy talked way too much, for starters. Whether it was about how the stream worked or Fairies—she answered every question the group had for her.

She's probably beholden to a rule that keeps her from telling us information unless we ask for it...

Those were similar to the restrictions placed on them for this game, after all.

“Either way, I already know the answer to what I'm about to ask you. I'm just double-checking for Steph.”

With utmost confidence, Sora continued:

“Here's our next question: Elkia is on the verge of collapse, and depending on whether we can win this game, it'll barely survive by the skin of its teeth... Am I right?”

“_____!!”

Everyone with the exception of Foeniculum and Sora himself gasped.

Sora didn't care who they'd lost to or why.

The five of them had been taken out of Elkia and forced to play

under these rigorous circumstances.

This was more than enough for him to know that Elkia was in danger.

Sora had asked his question confidently, but—with a bold grin—Foeniculum replied:

“...The answer’s *no* to that one.”

_____ *Huh?*

Did I miss something else? Sora asked himself, but:

“A lot more than just Elkia is at stake here. We’re talkin’ all of Immanity and a bunch of other races that’re on the chopping block. ♣”

_____ *Uh...yikes?*

Sora listened to Foeniculum’s answer in a cold sweat.

He looked into her eyes, which showed the same anticipation, trust, and anxiety as before.

“I really need y’all to pull through for me here. I got a lot at stake as well—it’s a once-in-a-lifetime gamble,” Foeniculum warned the group with a serious expression before *poofing* away.

“Soraaa... Soraaa...? Exactly what kind of mistake did we really make...?”

Evidently, their mistake had far worse consequences than he could’ve ever imagined.

Sora ignored Steph, who was wincing as she questioned him. He paced back and forth, deep in thought.

What the heck kind of mistake did we make?

With no memories or way to contact the outside world, there was no point in even thinking about it.

Not only that, but considering what they’d have to do to turn the tables on this impossible game meant one thing—they *didn’t have much time*.

Thus, Sora focused every brain cell he had on figuring out a way to acquire five billion points in tips as quickly as humanly possible...



After the stream on the seventh day, Foeniculum sat in her private chambers she’d carved out of a corner in space, cackling to herself like a madwoman.

“Hyeh-heh-heh-hoh-haaa!! Gweh-heh-heh, look at all this soul moola!!”

Why wouldn’t she be cackling? Her followers—which started at

eighty-seven—were now over one hundred and twenty thousand.

The tips—Fairy souls—had reached numbers Foeniculum had never seen before.

“Ahhh, I’m gonna be a top streamer—well, at this rate, at least. I’m still somewhere around the middle in terms of rankings!! I’m kinda like a celebrity! More souls must make for a bigger heart; bet I can even be nice to all my shit-talking haters—nah, actually, screw ‘em. Yeah, I’m not one for lying to myself. ❀”

She checked her screen—the stream was currently turned off—before giving a hearty *Up yours* with both her middle fingers to the sky.

Looking down on those who looked down on you—was there a better feeling in the world? Nope!

“Take that, losers!! Y’all can suck it!! Gyah-haaa!!”

Foeniculum hooted and hollered while she pranced around the room—before stopping on a dime.

She then took another peek at the screen.

Her eyes fixed on the amount of soul tips Sora and the gang had accumulated, she looked at the total and whispered, “...With this many souls saved up, I bet no one’d notice if I used a few for myself, r-right...?”

She could afford super-rare clips of that famous Grand Magus or a special kinky virtual-space patch for professionals...

There were all sorts of things that made her swallow her tears and decide to forgo due to lack of funds, but she could afford them now. Like, *all* of them.

.....

“N-no, I probably shouldn’t!! But...they’d kinda sorta be like research, in a way... Th-that’s it—it’s an investment for future streams! Capital expenditure! I’ll need the right equipment to make it to the big leagues!!”

Foeniculum justified her shopping spree, when—

“THOU SHALL NOT WASTE.”

“GYA-HAAA-HOOO?! Of coooourse I won’t; jeez, it was just a joke!! All right, all right, so I almost gave in to the ol’ devil on the shoulder there, but I didn’t in the end— Oh, it’s *you*.”

The Fairy had prostrated herself onto the floor, ready to beg her viewers for forgiveness. But the voice wasn’t coming from her screen.

Realizing who its owner was, Foeniculum sat up with a pout.

“I can’t believe I got on the floor and begged for nothin’... So anyway, what’s up?”

“THE CONFESSION HAS BEGUN. THERE ISN’T MUCH TIME. MAKE HASTE.”

Foeniculum scoffed at the voice's blunt remarks.

Yeah, yeah, I know already. No need to remind me.

Yes... The truth Sora and the others would never be able to recall.

What had been completely erased from their memories—the situation on the outside, born from a *poison*...

Namely, they needed to save Elkia—which was trapped in the spatial phase boundary Spratul via a Sprite Tune created by Fairies working for Elven Gard—before the spies confessed everything. *That* was the situation.

In order to do that, they had to interfere with the spatial phase boundary by using *more energy than it took for the boundary itself to engulf Elkia*.

The power they needed: souls to the tune of five billion.

However:

"I know that. But these things take time. You got any idea how hard it is to keep this a secret from the Elves? I gotta use the Covenants to stream this privately to make sure my subscribers don't blab about it."

After all, Foeniculum's plan went directly against Elven Gard's.

She couldn't advertise her stream publicly, and since it was kept a secret by the Covenants, there was no way for it to spread by word of mouth, either. It was taking a while for her channel to really catch on—even with how quickly it'd blown up by now.

But that was neither here nor there.

"I bet this coulda gone a lot faster if you hadn't erased all their memories and forbade me from talking to them. If you wanna complain to someone, maybe you should find a mirror."

That being said...

Fairies were interested solely in authentic love and passionate, organic romance.

Had the group known what they were getting into, they would've ended up pretending to love each other.

There was no way Foeniculum's piece-of-crap, keyboard-warrior viewers who thought they're hot shit—er, Fairies with good taste—would take interest in saving Elkia from destruction.

So...the current method at least kept things natural, in a way. She had to admit that...

Nope! Everything is fine!! We just need to up the intensity, that's all!!
Foeniculum told herself as she took out a cigar.

Smoke escaped her mouth as she asked the voice, "...Now that you mention it...can't Dragonias see the future? What're you so antsy about?"

That's right—the owner of the voice was none other than a dragon.

—Ixseed Rank Four, Dragonia...

According to lore, Dragonia existed in the past, present, and future—all at the same time.

They were like a living hurricane of spoilers—a strange, unfortunate race.

Needless to say, such beings should know about the near future, at the very least.

Especially *this* guy. Foeniculum furrowed her brow. However...

“I CANNOT SEE THE FUTURE.”

She met this succinct answer with wide eyes.

She wasn't surprised at the answer itself. According to Elf research, there were schools of thought that believed Dragonia surpassed even Old Deus in power.

What shocked her was—as impossible as it seemed—she felt the slightest hint of *anxiety* in the dragon's voice.

“I SAW THAT THE GREAT WAR WOULD CONTINUE FOR AN ETERNITY. BUT IT ENDED.”

The impossible future became a thing of the past.

This meant that the future was neither eternal nor definite, and what's more—

“I SHALL REPEAT MYSELF: THIS IS THE FIRST INSTANCE I HAVE INTERFERED WITH TIME.”

—the future was uncertain, and the dragon was playing a role in directing it.

Therefore, his interference of time could bring about any number of results.

“I CONFESS TO THEE: I AM NOTHING BUT A FOOL. THE FUTURE IS UNKNOWABLE.”

Though the dragon didn't speak much, his words were fully understood.

.....*Ya don't say.*

Foeniculum exhaled smoke out of a twisted smile and replied, “That means I know somethin' you don't. Guess you Dragonias ain't all you're cracked up to be, eh?”

It now made sense to Foeniculum how Sora and the others could defeat an Old Deus. It was this easy for her to out-know an even higher being. After all:

“The future's already set in stone. There's always just two possibilities.”

Yep, and they are:

“It’s heads or tails—ya either *win* or *lose*. That’s it!”

Foeniculum continued with a victorious grin. “And I’ve put all my chips into winning. If I lose... Well, there ain’t much of a future for me then. That’s why I gotta win! So really, I guess there’s only one future.”

She spat out her cigar, glared right at the dragon’s voice, and—scolded him.

“I’m gonna win... That’ll be the next past you see, got it?”

“LET THIS BE KNOWN: ANY VICTORY SHALL AMOUNT TO NOTHING MORE THAN A DRAW.”

“Yeah, yeah, tell someone who cares.”

“BUT I SHALL ADMIT THAT IT IS THE FUTURE I HOPE FOR.”

And then, as if it had all been a dream, the voice vanished.

In the very last moments of its presence, Foeniculum almost felt like the voice was chuckling—but it was probably just her imagination.

She gave a long exhale before loosening up her shoulders.

She could feel her entire body getting stiff, and now, of all times. “Jeez...,” she grumbled to herself. “Dumbass lizard doesn’t even have to show his stupid face to wear me out... But...he had a point. We’re not gonna make it in time at this rate...”

Though the tips started off much stronger than she originally expected, it was still far too little than what they needed. What Foeniculum did with the points didn’t matter. It was going to take a few years to get to five billion.

I need to do something, she thought.

“...Welp, now what? ...Hmm? Is something burning—? Gyaaaah! My cigar was still lit—the flowers are on fire!! Somebody get me some waterrrr!!”

And as she ruminated, she started screaming at the top of her lungs...



CHAPTER 2 HORIZONTAL THINKING

LATERAL APPROACH

Day Eight—Nighttime.

Steph climbed up a long stone staircase that seemed to stretch into the starry sky.

She was wearing the Eastern Union's ungainly festival attire—a *yukata* and wooden sandals, the latter of which clacked noisily as she clumsily ascended the stairs.

Eventually, she made it to the top, although not without tripping several times on the way.

The sight before her was enough to take her breath away.

It had been a garden bursting with flowers only hours before.

Foeniculum had likely painted over the space—now numerous lights and crowds of people dotted the landscape, which had become an expansive, lively city bustling with civilization.

The Eastern Union held three great festivals each year.

When Werebeast unified as a single country, the individual festivals run by various clans and tribes gradually combined until eventually only three remained.

One of the three was a summer festival held in the nation's capital, Kannagari.

Steph gazed in awe as one of the world's most famous festivals played out before her very eyes: the Star Festival...

She marveled at the countless paper lanterns illuminating every corner of Kannagari.

The palanquin slowly parading through the main square, in particular, caught her eye—it was like a moving treasure hall.

Food stands featuring a variety of delicious Eastern Union cuisine lined the road to the shrine. Some booths featured games, which were teeming with children who gathered to play them.

Most spectacular of all, however, were the fireworks that lit up

the night sky in a shade of crimson.

Incandescent shards of light created by the Eastern Union's artisan-grade gunpowder technology blossomed like flowers in the heavens...

The incredible scene was greater than what Steph had heard about, let alone imagined. She exhaled a deep sigh.

—Even in the tumultuous world of Disboard, where racial tensions ran high, this festival was touted as one of the most beautiful in the land.

Steph had always longed to visit it ever since she was small.

In fact, now that the Eastern Union was part of the Commonwealth of Elkia, she intended to take advantage of her governmental powers and stop by Kannagari during the festivities—she'd already made the proper travel arrangements. And there she was, face-to-face with that very festival, even if it was something fabricated with Fairy magic.

...There she was indeed, and yet—

“I shouldn't be thinking about the festival!! How am I supposed to enjoy myself knowing that the fate of Elkia is on the line?! We don't have time to lounge around!!”

The sight would usually have Steph starry-eyed, but she still couldn't get over the news she'd been hit with the night before.

According to Sora, Elkia—and multiple races—were at risk of being wiped off the face of Disboard.

Despite these circumstances—

“Chill out, Steph. We dunno for sure how much trouble the world is in yet.”

Several more pairs of wooden sandals could be heard approaching the panicked Steph from behind, clacking up the stone path with each step.

Hearing Sora's nonchalant comment, Steph gritted her teeth and caught her breath. “...I—I suppose that's true. That's why we're here, to stop it, and—”

“Affirmative: Calculating based on available evidence and elapsed time. Chances that Elkia has *already met its destruction* estimated at fifty-two-point-three percent.”

“It sounds to me that the party outside is just about over. Then shall we not enjoy the party here?”

“Nooooooo!! Somebody, please let me out of here!! I need to help my country!! Oh, the Immanity!!”

The group's harsh prognosis had Steph wailing and slamming her forehead on the stone path.

—There really was no time for them to lounge around.

Steph wondered if she should find the quickest way out of there and go save Elkia.

She knew that she wouldn't serve much of a purpose in this game—or any games, really. As sad as it may be, Steph knew where she stood in the hierarchy of gaming prowess.

If she was going to be of any help to Sora and the others, it wasn't by winning games but by governing her country.

Maybe she could slow down Elkia's fall and buy the group some time?

In which case, wouldn't it be more prudent for her to couple up with someone and get out of here?

Fortunately—just as Sora said—four of the group's members could easily escape this space.

However, what stopped them from doing so was that their fifth member wouldn't be able to make it out alone.

Nevertheless, if only two people escaped, that would still leave three behind—which should be enough to keep the love documentary stream going, shouldn't it?

Elkia—Immanity's sole surviving nation—was facing an existential crisis. This was not the time for a young lady to be concerned with romance or her own personal shortcomings.

She needed to fall in love with somebody, even if she had to Aschente her way into doing it!!

Committing internally to this desperate determination, Steph turned and faced the group.

“Wow, talk about pulling out all the stops. This is awesome.”

“...B-Brother... D-don't, let go of...my h-hand...okay...?”

“_____”

When she saw Sora and Shiro—no, Sora, to be precise—she froze in place and gasped.

He was also wearing an Eastern Union *yukata* and holding hands with his younger sister.

Being out of his typical sloppy attire made him look more dignified than usual.

His slender body was by no means burly, but Steph got a glimpse of his hard chest peeking through his robe...

It made her realize: *Oh... Sora really is a grown man...*

—Ba-dum...

Steph felt her chest tighten as a quiet voice whispered to her from within the confines of her mind:

—*Maybe it's time to be more honest with yourself.*

You need to become a couple with Sora to get out of here.

You have to couple up with him to save your country.

That is your duty, Stephanie Dola.

It's the perfect excuse to get with him—you know this, don't you?

It doesn't matter if your romance was manufactured; this little spark is the real thing—

“Now's not the time to be catching feelings!! You have to get out of here, Stephanie Dola!! These are *personal* feelings—and false ones at that!!”

She was either trying to bring herself out of her trance or perhaps dig up an escape route. Steph's forehead continued to chip away at the stone path.

“Proposal: Lady Dol's SAN confirmed as critically low. Recommending proper rest as quickly as possible. Suggested course of action—pair up with Irregular Number and remove her from the game. Strongly recommended. A brilliant idea. *Gute idee.*”

“Master, allow me to make a suggestion as well. We should eliminate as many obstacles as we can ahead of time—namely by removing little Dora and that scrap metal from this space. ♪”

The two ladies tried to throw each other under the bus when Steph realized something.

Th-that's it, she thought. I don't need to pair up with Sora—Jibril or Emir-Eins will work just fine.

Regardless of what the two were after, Steph knew she could couple up with one of them and escape.

“—————”

The moment she set eyes on them, however, she found herself captivated anew.

A beautiful angel and a lovely doll, each dressed in a colorful *yukata*...

The thin fabric emphasized their allure in a way that could only be described as otherworldly.



And Steph knew—the feeling of their skin hidden beneath that same thin sheet of fabric.

Despite their mere daylong romance—a forced romance, at that—the passion she'd felt had been seared into her memories.

—Ba-dum...

Ah... *Who should I get together with...?*

If I pick one person, then I need to stifle my feelings for the others. I can't—

“What are you *thinking*?! This space is influencing your feelings—not to mention this whole *Oh, whoever will I pick?* ☆ attitude!! Get ahold of yourself, Stephanie Dola!! Argh!! Romancing so many different people just makes you a trashy woman who'll throw herself at anyone!!”

BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG!

Shiro watched pityingly as Steph slammed her head into the stone walkway.

“...Brother...we should, probably...let Steph get some...rest...,” she whispered.

“Sorry, but no can do. Steph is one of the most important members we'll need for this love game. She's also the most normal of us all right now, depending on how you look at it. She'll be fine—besides, it's all for comic relief.”

—Steph was just her usual old self when she slammed her head on the ground, Sora asserted.

That showed the heightened level of trust he placed in her. Oddly enough, the rest of the group agreed with him.

As the festivities continued, Jibril shot the sky a look. “...And? When will we receive an explanation as to why you remodeled the garden after the Star Festival?” she asked, then added in a huff, “Not to mention these outfits.”

She didn't need to wait for an answer: This was the setting for today's game.

The fact that Foeniculum went to these lengths meant that this one wouldn't be as easy as the previous three.

Emir-Eins joined Jibril in cautiously squinting at the sky, when—

“Bwa-ha-ha—HA-HA-HAAA!! Check it out!! They used to call me a bottom-of-the-barrel streamer, but look at 'em now! They're all waiting for the show to start, like a buncha simpletons!! No more shit-talking my channel, 'cause soon enough, I'm gonna be a ☆ superstar

streamer!! You ignorant plebes are gonna be prostrating yourselves as you worship me through your screen!! Get on your knees, bitches! Mwa-ha-ha-ha-haaa!! GYAAA-HA-HAAA!!”

—Foeniculum finally made her appearance: rolling around, laughing in front of a screen.

...She appeared exuberant over the rate her daily viewership was increasing.

Sora glanced at the screen, where he noticed what appeared to be a comment section, and called out to her:

“Uh... I don’t speak Fairy, so I’m not sure what they’re saying, but —”

“Whazzat?! You got somethin’ so important to say that it’s worth interrupting my yay-me time?!”

“It’s just the comments; they’re coming in so fast—you sure they can’t hear you right now?”

“Hey, guuuuuuys! ❀ It’s everyone’s favorite super-shitty streamer, Foeniculum heeere! ❀ Gosh, Sora, you can’t go calling our precious viewers simpletons; that’s a big no-no!! Save the word ‘ignorant’ for the queen of ignorance—*moi*!! Oh no, viewers! Your boots look so dirty—I better lick them clean!! *Lick, lick, lick, lick*— Gahhhh!! The stream’s totally buried in hate!! It’s going up in flames!!” She pivoted to pandering to her viewers practically at the speed of light. “Whoa, what the—?! Where’s all this backlash coming from?! We haven’t even started yet!! Somebody get a fire extinguisher!! I know—we’re starting this puppy five minutes early today!! That’ll calm ’em down!!”

The group shared the same thought: *Turn off your mic already...*

Jibril’s question—along with Steph, who continued to bash her skull against the pavement—went unheeded, and the eighth stream kicked off in disarray.....



“Heeey! ❀ It’s Channel Foeniculum comin’ atcha with our next stream!! Today is episode eight of *A Space That Only Couples Can Leave*!! And it’s brought to you live by yours truly—”

The group was used to Foeniculum’s fake emcee voice by this point.

She acted as peppy as possible to try shifting the tone of the chat, but it was no use.

“Hold up; did you guys bring those from the waiting room chat log?! I’m gonna block whoever’s posting those screenshots!! What the —?! Are those clips of me?! I only said that, like, two minutes ago!! How’d you get that video edited so quickly?! Y’all have way too much free time on your hands!!!”

Foeniculum shrieked at the screen as it was inundated with angry commenters.

But this was the obvious outcome. No matter where you are or who you're dealing with, the more you try sweeping your mistakes under the rug, the angrier the internet mob will get.

"Um, uh... A-anyway!! I may be the shittiest streamer on the Linkernet, b-but I've got an awesome show for you today!! We're changing things up a bit this time!!"

There is one way to quell the fury of the masses, however: bring them something even more sensational. And that was:

"Feast your eyes!! Today's game will take place at—ta-daaa!! That's right, the *Star Festival*!! Not only that, but the gamer duo Blank will be helping with the stream!!"

"... 'Sup..."

"Greetings, my Fairy audience!! Allow me to introduce myself!! I'm the executive producer for today's game—the elder brother half of Blank: Sora, virgin, age eighteen!! I love seeing the dumbass looks on people's faces after I pull one over on 'em—that happens to be my hobby and my greatest talent!! I'm forever single, ready to forever mingle. ♪"

"Yaaaay!! Now that's what I call an introduction! ♣ Let's give 'em a round of applause!!"

"Whaaat?!"

The intro went exactly as Foeniculum intended.

Not only her viewers' jaws, but the collective jaws of Steph, Jibril, and Emir-Eins dropped.

Yessss, that's it—that's the kind of faces I like to see, Sora thought, soaking it all up.

—No point in hiding it any longer.

What sort of game were they to play with a stage of this scale...?

Sora and Shiro had the answer to Jibril's original question the entire time.

It was a scheme the two had proposed to Foeniculum that morning!!

"The siblings paid for today's stage using everyone's tips—that's a total of one hundred and thirty-four million points!! Let's give 'em an even bigger round of applause for their big hearts and big wallets!!"

"Wh-whaaaat?! What is she saying—? AGHHH!! All our points are gone!!"

Foeniculum's commentary sent a panicked Steph scrambling to check the group's tablet. She started shrieking once more.

—Again, no point in hiding this, either.

The Star Festival, their outfits, the crowd, the booths—anything

and everything.

None of it was Foeniculum's doing.

It was created the same way Steph had built a well and a kitchen for the group.

Sora used their tips to buy all this!

Their savings were literally down to zero... They didn't even have enough for dinner that night, but regardless—

“Now, I bet y'all are asking yourselves the same question: *What could they possibly have in mind to put all this together?* Well, I've got your answer!! Get ready for the details of today's games!!”

The chat was all ears at Foeniculum's different surprise announcements.

And they weren't alone, as Steph and the others waited in silence for the Fairy's explanation.

Then, following a tantalizing ten-second-long drumroll...

“I present to you, the first-ever...Two-Hour No-Loving Summer Festival!!”

A succession of particularly large fireworks went off as she made her declaration.

Everyone—save for Sora, Shiro, and Foeniculum—wondered what this meant, though the Fairy moved right along, theatrically continuing her explanation against lively festival music.

“The rules are simple!! Our five contestants will spend two hours at the Star Festival—that's it!!”

It should be mentioned that every firework that accented Foeniculum's commentary cost a whopping ten thousand points.

Sora, meanwhile, was dying to see the face Steph was going to make once she went over the receipts.

“However!! The contestants aren't allowed to fall in love with anyone during this two-hour period!!”

As Foeniculum spoke, Sora and the others found watch-like devices materializing on each of their right arms.

“All five of them will be wearing spark sensors on their wrists! A single spark of love is all it takes for the needle to go past the line, and then they're *out*! They'll immediately be subjected to a penalty!!”

She went on to describe the penalty game the contestants would face.

“What kind of penalty, you ask? They'll be forfeiting control of their bodies to me for ninety seconds!! Oh, I obviously won't be able to harm them in any way—don't hafta worry about that, thanks to the

Covenants and all. ♣”

Basically, if they felt even the faintest romantic spark, Foeniculum would take control of their bodies, and—

“And!! If any of our contestants manages to go two hours without feeling a spark for another player, they win! There can be more than one winner, and they’ll all get rewards! Also—whoever felt the most sparks and the second-most sparks will receive our usual prize: They’ll be coupled up for a day!! Them’s the rules!!”

With that, Foeniculum finished her explanation, but—

? Is that it?

—Sora could tell through the screen that the viewers were left scratching their heads.

So contestants would be penalized for any sparks of love by having their bodies controlled by Foeniculum for ninety seconds. Okay, being unable to move your own body is quite a punishment in itself—who knows what she’d have them do.

Still—you couldn’t help but wonder if that was all there was to this game.

At least, the viewers must have felt that way.

“.....”

Steph, Jibril, and Emir-Eins, on the other hand, didn’t share that sentiment.

Sora and Shiro had devised this game—the group knew there was more to it.

Jibril and Emir-Eins smiled, undeterred. They believed in their master.

Steph, meanwhile, glowered at Sora and Shiro. She knew full well that they were absolutely up to no good.

Sora saw their expressions and, grinning ear to ear, answered their gazes silently:

Thanks, guys. Thanks for believing in me. That’s right: There’s way more to this than meets the eye.

“Anyhoo!! We’ll get started in five minutes! I’ll be taking comments until then! ♣ ...Hey!! What’s with you guys?! We get it already; you heard what I said in the waiting room, so let’s move past that— Yes, yes, of course I’ll get on the floor and grovel for you.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Steph caught Foeniculum on her hands and knees begging for mercy, then shot Sora a reproachful look.

“...I believe you have some explaining to do?”

“Hmm? Oh yeah... About Werebeast *yukatas*—they’re the same as in my world. You know how I said they don’t wear underwear with them? That’s a lie. They’ve always worn underwear with *yukatas*. Still do, even today.”

“Whaaaat?! W-wait, I’m going to go get changed— No, that’s not what I’m talking about!!” Steph squeezed her thighs together and blushed, then shook her head furiously. “I’m asking why you’re teaming up with *Foeniculum* to host the stream!!”

“What’s there to ask? *Foeniculum*’s on our side—so we need to work together.” And by that, he meant: “We gotta reach five billion points. All I did was provide her with the system to do just that.”

Yes—*Foeniculum* was playing this game *with* them, not against them.

To win the game, they *both* needed five billion points—that basically changed everything.

—At first, Sora thought the objective of their game was to have the contestants fall in love with each other, that the whole point was romance...something completely foreign to him. He had no idea how he would ever agree to such terms. Therefore, as embarrassing as it was, Sora deduced that this game was some sort of punishment for losing a different game, and then he sank into despair— However...

—If love wasn’t their objective, but rather a means to an end—that turned everything on its head.

In other words, if the objective was to accrue a massive amount of souls in the form of tips, then they needed a method to earn tips from their viewers, the Fairies—and that method was...love!

It was the only explanation as to why Sora would even agree to a game like this in the first place—the reason being—!!

“I know jack shit about love and romance!! This is *me* we’re talking about here, the supreme king of all virgins— However!! If our goal is to rake in the dough—perhaps by means of a little cunning and trickery—well, I’m kinda a specialist in that department!!”

Sora laid out his logic for Steph, who appeared to agree.

“...I see now,” she replied with a nod. “I guess there’s not much to be said about you spending one million three hundred and forty thousand points without asking any of us. These are just your usual shenanigans. The only thing I have to say is that if we’re allowed to throw our money away, then I’d like to buy a bath as soon as we get back to our rooms.”

“Damn straight. Love to be surrounded by people who understand me. ♪”

“But you’ve left out the most important detail, Sora.”

“Oh? Was there something else I forgot to explain?”

“I’m talking about the entire point of this game!! She said it was the *No-Loving Summer Festival*!! What does that even mean?!”

For once, Steph appeared to actually notice that Sora had glossed over this crucial aspect.

“Elkia—nay, most of the races—is on the brink of extinction!! Now’s not the time for silly games!! How are we supposed to feel sparks of love in this situation anyway?!”

—Says the girl who was bashing her head against the pavement over her own love life...

Shiro, Jibril, and Emir-Eins cringed at Steph.

“You don’t have to,” Sora replied apathetically. “Foeniculum’s gonna reward us if we manage not to feel any sparks—then we’ll get five free questions. You know how much info I can get outta her with that many, right? So all we gotta do is make it through the next two hours.”

“Oh... H-huh? I—I guess you’re right...”

...Two hours without feeling any sparks.

A nigh impossible feat for Steph in her current state, although she didn’t seem to realize it in the moment.

Jibril and Emir-Eins, however, did pick up on this, which was why they knew: Sora had zero intention of seeing *nobody feel a spark*... Thus:

“Listen, there’s nothing to worry about. We’ll earn our money back in no time.”

Steph was the only one who failed to follow his logic. That’s when:

“Alilll righty, then! Time to get this show on the road, people!!”

And just like that, five minutes had passed. Foeniculum announced the start of the game, and the group was simultaneously capsulized within bubbles before they all disappeared with a single *poof*.



“Oh... Come to think of it, she never said anything about us starting at the same spot...”

—As soon as Foeniculum declared the game had begun, Steph was teleported somewhere else in the vicinity.

After managing to get her wits about her rather quickly, Steph slowly walked down the busy road, lost in thought.

...Sora made it sound so simple—are we really just going to spend two

hours here...?

This was a game designed by Sora and Shiro—Steph knew it wasn't going to be *that* easy.

Steph did everything she could to keep her mind off the festival and any thoughts that would make her feel a spark of love.

—The Star Festival, one of Disboard's grandest events, was in full swing.

The spectacle was more than enough to thrill Steph, but the smells alone were achingly enticing.

The festival route was lined with booths dishing out the best eats the Eastern Union had to offer...

Though it was all fabricated by Sora and Shiro using Fairy soul tips, the food was without a doubt the real thing, and it was just waiting for her to eat it. Steph did everything in her power to resist the exceedingly tempting aroma.

—She had no idea what would set off the spark sensor strapped to her wrist!!

For all she knew, showing signs of excitement or even licking her lips at the delicious smells could be considered out of bounds!

It's always this way with those two... This is pretty much torture...! she thought.

No! This is for my country! I'll withstand anything they throw at me, even actual torture!!

Yes—Elkia, and all of Immanity, was on the line.

Steph couldn't possibly feel an inkling of passion in such circumstances!

She just needed to mindlessly stroll around for two hours.

This is for Elkia—it's the only way I can help my country now!!

Steph committed to her plan with an iron will, however—

“...Puff~~! ♥”

“Eek?!”

—out of nowhere, she felt a light puff of air hit her ear. Her iron will shattered into a million pieces.

“H-hey—what was that for, Jibril?!”

Steph spun around to lash out at Jibril.

However, the Flügel seemed more confused than apologetic.

“Oh...? I can tell your heart rate increased, but it seems like it wasn't enough to set off your sensor. It seems the definition of love in this game is strictly emotional. In that case... Hmm, how shall I go about setting off sparks for you...? This may prove difficult.”

Jibril smiled as she shared her intent to make Steph fall in love.

“Do you realize what you’re saying?! Shouldn’t we try to make it through this game *without* feeling any sparks?! We’ll be able to ask five more questions if we—”



“Oh no, little Dora. We won’t be able to do that—there are two reasons for this.”

A confused Steph tried to argue her point, but Jibril held up two fingers and made her rebuttal.

“One: Master explained that the purpose of this game is to raise tips. If we were to spend the entire two hours without feeling any sparks, we would never be able to recoup our spent tips.”

—*Th-that’s true, but...*

“Two: It is *impossible* for you, little Dora, to spend two hours without feeling a single spark. Simply seeing me, let alone Master, in a *yukata* has you excited. The only way you could make it through this game without feeling anything...is if you were unconscious.”

Without giving Steph a chance to speak, Jibril calmly continued.

“In other words—while I lack the insight to fully understand Master’s intricate plan, one thing is more than obvious: You will be the one who feels the most sparks and therefore will come in last.”

Y-you think it’s obvious...?

“Well, perhaps not so much obvious as it is...most definite? Inevitable? ...I can’t quite come up with an adequate word to phrase it... Let’s go with a *predetermined fact as immutable as history itself*.”

J-Jibril of all people doesn’t have a word to describe it...?!

Steph nearly fainted from disbelief. “However,” Jibril added, her expression doleful, “if such is the nature of this game, then that will make things rather hard to *navigate*—don’t you think?”

“...Wh-what do you mean by navigate?”

“Everyone is after the same thing—*ensure that they and Master feel the most sparks during this game* so that the two of them become a couple for a day. This will prove fundamentally impossible.”

“Is *that* what you’re worried about?!”

Actually, Jibril had a point. Following her logic, if Steph really was determined to come in last place—that meant the only possible couple would be Steph and somebody else...!!

“Therefore, the rest of us will have to resort to plan B—make somebody else come in second-to-last place. ♪ In other words, I’ll force you and one other person out of the battle for Master’s heart. ♪”

...So the *navigating* Jibril spoke of was—

“I’m going to see to it that you and that junk pile find love at every corner—it’s the optimal interpretation of Master’s intent behind this game. What do you think? ♥”

This was Jibril’s reasoning—namely:

—*She’s going to hit on me for the next two hours.*

With an elegant bow, Jibril formally declared war on Steph, who subsequently felt a distinct chill run down her spine.

—*This is bad.*

Steph was certain that Jibril's assessment was true.

Had she known that Jibril was the one blowing into her ear before, she most definitely would have felt a spark—enough even to be considered out of bounds! Steph was in the worst position possible for this game!

What's more—Steph could tell Jibril was gleefully mulling over how to get her heart pounding, and the sheer anticipation for what that would entail sent Steph's spark sensor a mere hairbreadth away from out of bounds!!

Oh no, oh, no, no, no!! This is bad!!

Even if Jibril's intuition was correct, and these were Sora and Shiro's true intentions, Steph knew she couldn't allow herself to feel any sparks during the game!

If she did, and thus lost her ability to ask Foeniculum a question—that was essentially weighing the fate of Elkie against her own romantic feelings, with the latter side tipping the scale!

I absolutely cannot allow that to happen_____!!

She needed some way to escape Jibril's clutches.

But how...?

Jibril couldn't use magic in the Spratul, yet she had once proved to be nearly as physically capable as the Werebeasts during a previous game where she couldn't use magic. Steph knew that even with the cover of the festivalgoers, it wouldn't take long for Jibril to weed her out—she knew she couldn't escape.

Then my only option is...to make Jibril feel a spark!!

There was another rule to the *No-Loving* game.

Any players marked as out would lose their bodily autonomy to Foeniculum for ninety seconds!!

And those ninety seconds might be enough for Steph to potentially escape Jibril!

All she'd need to do was hide somewhere for two hours_____!!

However, Jibril saw right through Steph's scheme. The next words out of the Flügel's mouth sent Steph into a downward spiral.

"Dora, there's nothing you can do to get me excited. Accept your fate. ♥"

Steph was screwed—but what got to her even more was how Jibril denied having any feelings for her.

The shock brought tears to Steph's eyes, but then—

"Good news: Irregular Number's plan will fail. Why? Because this unit shall obstruct her."

—her eyes once again filled with hope the moment Emir-Eins

gallantly swooped in to protect her.

Yes, that's right! Jibril is going to try to hook me up with Emir-Eins!! And Emir-Eins won't stand idly by and let that happen!!

That puts Emir-Eins and me on the same team—I knew I could count on her!!

But it didn't take long before she was hit by the all-too-obvious reality of the situation.

True, while Emir-Eins was Jibril's enemy...it didn't necessarily put her on the same side as Steph, for you see—

“Declaration: Irregular Number's plan is to become a couple with Master. Her twisted desire is to become his side squeeze—somebody Master will call when he wishes to engage in sexual intercourse and then kick out of bed once he's finished. This unit will stop both parties from engaging in such relations.”

—————,

—————...*What?*

Both Steph and Jibril stared at Emir-Eins, mouths agape, when—

“Bzzzt!! Jibril and Stephanie!! Yer out!!”

—Foeniculum's announcement echoed through the festival.

“It's worth noting that Stephanie was out the moment Emir-Eins strutted onto the scene. ♣ I just let things marinade a bit till they got nice and juicy. How'd ya like them host skills?!”

Hearing this, Steph and Jibril both scrambled to check their sensors, only to find the needle was past the point of no return.

“AHHH! I lost my chance to ask a question!! N-no, this by no means indicates that I've chosen Emir-Eins over Elkie—! Wait, Jibril, is it true what Emir-Eins said about you?!”

“N-not at all!! I—I—I just couldn't help but picture it... Why you...lunking heap of scrap iron—!!”

“Affirmative: Irregular Number's deduction matches this unit's. The objective of this game is to pair another player with Lady Dol—her conclusion, however, is incorrect. It is *you*, Irregular Number, who will hook up with Lady Dol.”

Emir-Eins was on neither Steph's nor Jibril's side, as she intended to make the two fall in love. She scoffed, knowing that she herself didn't need to be the target of any sparks.

—She could merely use Sora to make them feel sparks.

And thus...an emotionless sneer appeared on Emir-Eins's face when a livid Jibril and a distraught Steph realized they'd fallen for her trick. But never mind all that.

“Now—it's time to give our contestants their punishment!!”

As soon as Foeniculum announced this, Jibril and Steph froze.

——.....

They found themselves unable to even bat an eye.

Emir-Eins waited cautiously for Foeniculum to say something next.

She still didn't understand Sora and Shiro's intent behind the punishment gimmick.

What she did know was that it was likely the game's true purpose.

——They would lose their bodily autonomy to Foeniculum for ninety seconds.

It was unclear what purpose this brief punishment served.

Foeniculum gave them their answer—not to the three of them directly, but to her viewers.

And that was:

“You—the viewers—will get to decide what I’ll have Jibril and Stephanie do for thirty seconds! We’ll collect the comments that receive the most tips!! You have sixty seconds to send in your suggestions!! We don’t have much time, so get to typin’!!!!”

——?

The three girls were at a loss.

The next instant, however, Jibril and Emir-Eins gasped in astonishment upon realizing what this meant.

They had agreed to let Foeniculum control their bodies for ninety seconds.

So the question remained: What was she going to do with them?

The answer: Foeniculum was going to sell their bodily autonomy to the highest bidder!!

This was what Sora meant by getting their investment back in no time!!

The three ladies figured this out the moment they heard the endless stream of *ka-chings* as the comment section exploded.

Then it happened the moment the sixty-second storm of paid comments came to an end.

“——?!”

Emir-Eins barely managed to visually confirm Jibril flying toward her with unbelievable swiftness.

She couldn't react in time, nor was she able to put up a fight as Jibril pinned her to the ground, salaciously licking her chops and grinning seductively. Emir-Eins felt the warmth of Jibril's skin and cursed her faulty machinery.

——*I’ve made a fatal error in judgment. I was negligent with my calculations.*

It was downright shameful for an Ex Machina to take this long to

react to a situation.

She succeeded in making Jibril and Steph feel a spark, then ascertained the details of the penalty game—this was when she should have made her escape!!

There was nothing the viewers—the Fairies—would have Jibril and Steph do other than try to excite Emir-Eins!!

The Fairies had requested to keep Emir-Eins from escaping.

Irregular Number was forced upon this unit—do the Fairies actually believe this will have any effect? she wondered.

“Report: Fairy tactics are futile. Odds of this unit feeling any romantic sparks for Irregular Number are irrefutably: *zero*.”

They may have taken advantage of her lackluster processing speeds and truncated her path to safety, but Emir-Eins remained steadfast that their plans were futile. However:

“...Ohhh? Then how did you end up on the ground...?”

Steph approached Emir-Eins and sweetly whispered this into her ear.

.....?

How? Because Irregular Number pushed this unit to the ground.

Emir-Eins was confused by her question, so Steph—or rather, the Fairies controlling Steph—elaborated for her.

“The Covenants prevent any nonconsensual harmful acts—so don’t you find it strange that Jibril was able to force you onto the ground?



“_____”

A moment later, Emir-Eins almost shut down upon confirming her fears.

...Could it be that...in this space that increases romantic feelings as time passes, Irregular Number’s actions were unconsciously translating into positive feelings—?

“Negative: Rejection: Rebuttal: Assertion denied. Hypothesis: This unit failed to detect impending harm. Therefore, this unit did not reject being pinned. Nothing more. This unit has yet to show a reaction. This unit’s love is her master’s and her master’s alone. Inevitability: This unit is her master’s object to do with whatever he — *Snap*.”

However, all of Emir-Eins’s rebuttals and emotions—

“**Bzzzzt!!** *There you have it!! Just like you guys predicted, Emir-Eins is out!!*”

—had been anticipated. Everything went according to the viewers’

requests.

Foeniculum made this clear with her announcement...and not only Emir-Eins, but the now-liberated Steph and Jibril shuddered in unison, utterly speechless.

Emir-Eins came to realize she'd had Jibril on her mind.

Moreover, all her romantic sparks for Sora caused her to nearly self-destruct.

It took less than a minute for the Fairies to come up with such an incredible strategy, and once again—

“Now it’s Emir-Eins’s turn!! You have sixty seconds to send in your requests!!”

—Foeniculum was asking them for another clever scheme.

“H-hey, Jibril?! Let go of me!!”

“Dora... Please, calm yourself...”

—It was more than evident that the viewers would pin Emir-Eins on the other two next and *definitely set off sparks*. Realizing this, Steph decided to use the viewers’ sixty-second submission period to escape as quickly as she could—but she was stopped by Jibril, who was as calm as could be.

“You and I, along with that pile of junk, have already been out once. We’ve all lost our chance to ask Foeniculum a question already—it’s too late for us to escape. Doing so would be meaningless.”

Well...she was right.

Granted, Steph wasn’t exactly thrilled to hear that from the person who robbed her of any chance to ask Foeniculum a question.

“This is exactly what my masters had in mind for this game—they want us to excite each other as much as we can in order to earn tips. In which case, I intend to do exactly that. Running away is not an option.” Jibril was resolute in her decision; she went on to add, “Furthermore: me, running away out of fear of falling in love with that garbage heap over there? Utterly asinine—it will never happen.”

Asinine, Jibril said. She wasn’t even going to toy with the idea.

Thus, Jibril spent the next sixty seconds facing off with a frozen Emir-Eins until the viewers’ requests came in.

Tensions were high—the earth seemed to shake as if Heavenly Smites and Apokryphens might be fired off at any moment.

—Jibril was ready for whatever Emir-Eins was going to hit her with.

She refused to feel a single spark, instead preparing to set off

sparks of her own as she spread her wings and braced herself.

“You can do whatever you want, Jibril!! Why do I have to stay and watch?!”

“No, I mustn’t let you go.”

Steph once again attempted to flee, but Jibril gripped her hand firmly.

“Forcing that scrap metal and me into a couple is the worst possible outcome—a heinous atrocity worse than fleeing. I need you to come in last, little Dora.”

“If you really believed she couldn’t make you feel anything, then you wouldn’t need me here as insurance!! Let go of me!! I don’t want my emotions to be toyed with any further!!” Steph hollered—but then a new thought struck her.

Huh...? Doesn’t that mean...Jibril would prefer to be a couple with me over Emir-Eins—?

“Bzzzzt!! I’m not sure why exactly, but that’s a second out for Steph!!”

“I knew this would happen!! SOMEBODY GET ME OUT OF HEEERE!!”



Thus, the Ex Machina and the Flügel—sworn enemies who once rent the heavens and the earth to decimate each other—fought over the heart of a single Immanity girl.

Anyone who knew their history believed this was all but inconceivable. But it was indeed happening, as the numerous spectators and relentless flow of tips attested to. A trembling Foeniculum merely watched stone-faced as the scene unfolded before her...

—————.....

“If all we gotta do is get the viewers to tip us, then it’s simple. We just need to let them *participate*.”

This conversation happened earlier that morning.

Sora called Foeniculum into his room and laid out his plan.

“We’ll make an interactive game. Viewers contribute tips in order to affect what happens to the players. For example: Whoever pays the biggest tip gets to choose what the players do.”

“Hrm... I just feel like we’ll end up alienating our casual viewers for the big spenders.”

“Right, so we’ll make a system where the casual viewers can band together and put up a fight against the heavy spenders.”

In order to do this—

“Make the requests tippable, then go with whichever request receives the most tips. That way, a group of one hundred viewers can send in ten thousand points each to beat a single viewer who sends in a million.”

This would allow the highest-backed request to receive the most soul points and come out on top.

In order for the most desirable scenario to play out, the viewers needed to amass as many tips as they could. The best way to get more tips was to find like-minded people and get them to watch the stream.

Then the viewers would flood the stream with all their friends, which would ultimately bring in more subscribers.

More subscribers meant more tips.

—This was all it took.

It was a system set up to reap five billion soul points as quickly as possible.

Sora wrapped up his explanation without sparing a second thought to Foeniculum’s astonished reaction:

“Fairies know way more about love than other races, so we’re gonna crowdsource some of their ideas. Who better to spice up the drama than the experts themselves?”

—————

—Things went exactly as Sora predicted.

Foeniculum watched in real time as her channel’s subscribers shot through the roof.

Sora and the others recovered their spent points instantaneously; tips came flying in before reaching unprecedented numbers.

No surprise there... The viewers had the chance to control an Ex Machina and a Flügel—and not just any Flügel, but *Jibril herself*.

The opportunity was worth more than its weight in their souls!

Not to mention that the viewers could get the pair to flirt or put the moves on each other, maybe even have them *actually* become lovers.

The Fairies engaged in heated debates over what to have the contestants do; they split into multiple factions that inundated the chat with a deluge of paid requests. It quickly devolved into an all-out tip war.

Foeniculum was past the point of excitement. She shuddered at the scene.

Not because of the twisted grin on Sora’s face when he’d explained his plan—it was actually the opposite.

—Devising the dastardly plan came as easily to him as breathing.

Like the laws of nature that dictate the flow of water.

She shuddered because he detailed this plan to her void of any emotion—like he was talking about the weather!!

I knew it! These guys are my cash cow!! I'm so glad I took this risk!!

Having said that...

Why does Sora insist that he's clueless when it comes to love?
Foeniculum wondered.

Everything that unfolded before her was, according to Sora, merely the beginning...

Just a small event to build up some hype, he'd said. We haven't even gotten to the main event yet!

Foeniculum turned her attention to a monitor that showed Sora and Shiro and flashed a devilish grin.



So: What is a summer festival in the first place...?

Are they held to ask God for world peace and a good harvest?

Or are they memorials for giving thanks to your ancestors?

Sure, those might be accurate festival origins.

But as far as Sora was concerned, they *didn't answer the question*.

A festival is an event for couples to dress up in *yukata*, holding hands and hanging all over each other!!

Or it's for those "more than friends but not quite dating" type of schmucks! You know, couples in training! It's an event tailor-made for normies who love to flaunt their social lives—nothing more, nothing less!

Sora refused to entertain any other opinions on the subject.

How else would you justify getting halfway trampled by a friggin' mob to pay eight hundred yen or whatever rip-off festival prices just to eat shitty street food and cotton candy? What reason is there to play some rinky-dink shooting game just to hit targets that'll never fall over like part of some off-brand, county-fair-tier, con artist gig? There's only one reason—and it's all so that couples can get their kicks canoodling in public!!

It goes without saying that Sora—a lifelong bachelor—always hated summer festivals.

In fact, he couldn't find a single reason *not* to hate them—a summer festival was a microcosm of socioeconomic inequality akin to the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. He felt it needed to be labeled as the terrible evil it was.

There was one day, however, when Shiro asked him to take her to a festival.

It happened two years prior... Sora was still sixteen, and Shiro was nine at the time; he'd never forget it.

They'd already committed to skipping school and shutting themselves in their home.

Nevertheless, Shiro said she wanted to go out—to a summer festival, of all things. Where there were crowds.

Though she refused to say why she wanted to go, Sora could tell that she really wanted to see a festival.

Holding his sister's hand, Sora mustered up the courage to go to the local festival for the first time in who knew how long.

...And then they got split up.

Jostled around by the surging crowd, Sora let go of his sister's tiny hand for only a second, then lost sight of her.

He ran through the festival grounds—trembling as tears ran down his cheeks—in search of Shiro among the throngs of people.

Even though Sora wanted to curl up into a ball on the spot, he knew Shiro was probably crying, so he kept up his frantic search.

...He eventually found her after the festival had ended, huddled alone in a corner.

She'd hidden away in the shadows with her knees curled up to her chest, quivering and stifling sobs.

Sora scrambled over to her to embrace her, but she just continued crying in his arms.

"...There's...no more, fireworks..." was all she said.

Sora tried everything he could to cheer her up: *We can see fireworks whenever we want, wherever we want.*

But Shiro just kept on crying...and crying and crying.....

.....

And thus, two years ago, Sora's dislike of festivals had evolved into hatred.

He never imagined he'd ever visit another summer festival...

—The siblings stared down at the Star Festival from atop a small hill, where they could get a panoramic view of the entire event.

Sora wanted to make sure he and Shiro wouldn't get separated this time, so he had Foeniculum teleport them to a far-off vantage point.

They watched the summer festival game while seated atop a fallen tree, each holding a caramelized apple they'd bought with the overflow tips.

Yes—they were *bystanders*.

"Bzzzzt!! That's Stephanie's fourteenth out!! And that's out number

eight for Jibril!!”

With every *bzzzt* Foeniculum set off, the siblings’ smartphone was hit with a new influx of tips.

Sora grinned; he could tell their romance event was going viral.

That’s right: Sora and Shiro weren’t actually on the festival grounds.

At the risk of sounding like a broken record: Sora knew absolutely nothing about love, let alone games involving love.

If he wasn’t going to serve a purpose on the stream, he might as well work behind the scenes.

Besides, he’d never start any game without Shiro by his side.

Not to mention that crowd; what would happen if he got separated from her in there? He didn’t even want to think about it.

Thus, when he laid out his plan for Foeniculum, he made sure to have her drop the two of them off atop a hill.

All they needed to do was wait for the game to end before they’d get a massive payday, along with the chance to ask two questions.

Granted, the whole question-and-answer outcome was nothing more than a way for him to wrangle Steph into participating...

Nevertheless, the two siblings were sitting on that log, watching the festival from afar when Sora was hit with a random thought.

He turned to Shiro—who wasn’t in her usual position atop his lap but seated next to him—and asked her a question.

“Hey, Shiro. I was just thinking: Why’d you suggest a summer festival?”

While Sora was the one who came up with the idea for this game, it was his sister who chose the setting.

You see, the only knowledge Sora had regarding love and romance came from manga and visual novels.

He’d considered a wide variety of settings—a pool, a camp, a theme park—but they all lacked a certain oomph needed to get the viewers really hyped up. Shiro proposed a summer festival.

From Sora’s perspective, an event like that would only serve to make her cry.

I would’ve guessed she’d find this traumatic, Sora thought. Shiro replied softly, looking down at the ground.

“I wanted...to see...fireworks...with you, Brother...”

___*BOOM.*

A firework could be seen going off in the distance, just as they had throughout the night.

For only an instant, Shiro's face was illuminated by their ephemeral glow, causing Sora to remember...

...She said the same thing two years ago, and she'd been crying that time.

It's not like fireworks weren't everywhere back home... They could even see them from the balcony of their bedroom prison—

“...Brother...why did you...hate, festivals...again?”

“Hmm? I feel like I've told you before, but it's because festivals are only for couples.”

“...Mm... That's right...”

Another round of fireworks lit up the sky.

“...Do you think...these fireworks are...pretty...?” Shiro asked, though she had her eyes closed the entire time and wasn't actually watching the fireworks herself.

“Yeah, sort of, I guess... But I still don't get how they're any different from fireworks you see anywhere else.”

Even Sora had feelings. He thought fireworks were pretty, just like anyone else did. He simply couldn't see the difference between watching them from his balcony or through a computer screen.

Without knowing why Shiro was looking down, Sora started laying it on especially thick to try getting her to watch them with him.

“You know why people think festival fireworks are the best? I'll tell ya why: Because couples aren't actually watching the fireworks!! They're at the festival for fireworks, but what they're really lookin' at is *each other*!!”

That's precisely why people enjoy festivals. In other words!

“No matter how much they try to rip you off at a summer festival—actually, that probably plays into it as well... At the end of the day, couples just wanna gaze into each other's eyes and do the usual spiel: She'll say, The fireworks sure are pretty, and he'll say back, Not as pretty as you, then she'll be like, Aw, you're so sweet! I love you ♥, then he'll be like, I love you, too, baby!! If we loners had any sort of legislative pull, I'd pass a shoot-on-sight decree for any nasty couple PDA—that'd be something!! Screw 'em; they can all burn in hell!!”

“...Um, Brother... You're the king...of Elkia...”

“Hrm?! You raise a good point!! Holy shit, I know exactly what I'm gonna do as soon as I get back on the throne!!”

The sound of festival drums mixed with the fireworks bursting high in the sky.

Despite the noise, a strange silence enveloped the siblings. Sora was unable to see Shiro's expression; she was still facing the ground.

Her voice hoarse, she said to him:

“...Are all fireworks...like these?”

Then, out of nowhere, Shiro grasped Sora's hand. Her grip was surprisingly tight.

He could feel her slightly trembling—this was when Sora took his first proper look at the night sky.

“—————”

His eyes widened. Even the stars that glistened in the heavens took a back seat to the nightscape that was peppered with colorful, gorgeous streaks of falling light.

—Did the Eastern Union have more advanced fireworks than his own world...?

For some reason, the fireworks he saw that night far outranked any he had seen before. Sora's breath caught in his throat at the sight

—

“...The fireworks...sure, are...pretty.”

“Yeah, they are. They've got nothing on you, though.”

“...I love you...Brother...”

“Yup, your brother loves you, too, Shiro. A whole lot.”

“...I wanted to...ask this...two years ago...”

—————*Now I see...*

Sora felt ashamed at how shallow he was.

He realized: Summer festivals could be enjoyed by more than just couples.

He could tell there was unparalleled value in the fireworks when he watched them together with his sister.

Thoroughly convinced of this, Sora dropped his gaze, but what he saw was—

“...Yeah... *This* is what...I wanted to, ask you...”

—Shiro's face, close enough for Sora to feel her breath.

Her eyes glistened with the flashes of fireworks.

Sora could feel the warmth of her cheeks through the darkness.

He could see her quivering lips open slightly as the words escaped them.

His sister's voice was so small and faint that it was almost fleeting—and yet despite the cacophony of distant booms that took a moment to reach them, he was surprised to find he could hear her quite clearly.

He was about to find out the true reason Shiro had wanted to go to a festival two years ago.

This was a question she wanted to ask him while they watched fireworks together:

“...Brother—why can’t you and I...be more, than this...?”

_____,
He knew better than anyone else that Shiro was gorgeous...or at least, he thought he did.

But seeing her like this: in her *yukata*, illuminated by the glow of fireworks in the sky as her lips seemed to beckon him...

Sora thought, *She’s more beautiful than anything I could ever imagine—no festival in any world could ever hold a candle to her.*

In that instant, Sora felt his heart stop.

And then—

“Bzzzzt!! Finally!! Sora, yerrrr out!!!!”

—there came a sudden announcement. The next thing to stop functioning was Sora’s brain.

“Ya did good, Shiro!! Just leave the rest to us Fairies!!”

.....,

.....*Huh?*

Wait a sec—what’s going on here...?

After a brief moment when his brain ceased to function, a panicked Sora looked around until his gaze at last landed on the spark sensor on his right arm—the needle on the watch was indeed past its mark.

He looked to his sister. She was neither trembling nor were her cheeks red.

She was her usual emotionless self, minus the slight grin. It was an evil grin—a traitorous grin.

“...Sorry, Brother... But it’s your fault for getting tricked... Right?”

“_____?!”

The words left her lips like a mask falling from her face.

Sora couldn’t actually move his face due to his impending punishment, but he knew what’d happened:

____She tricked me____!!

Everything up until that moment—*everything*—had been an act!!

Sora set up this game to keep himself out of the fray, but that wasn’t the case for Shiro!!

Foeniculum was likely in on it. Together they’d planned this stage, Shiro’s earlier behavior, and this question—everything!!

Did they make me feel a spark just so I’d get penalized...?!

But—why would they do that?!

The viewers have only thirty seconds to control me! What are they

gonna do with just thirty seconds?!

Sora had no idea what point there was in subjugating him to the Fairies.

Unable to come up with a single plausible answer, he sank into doubt and confusion.



Onlookers would have no way of knowing what Sora was thinking from his frozen expression.

But Shiro knew exactly what was on his mind.

She knew within an instant that he'd realized she and Foeniculum had teamed up to trick him.

However—once she confirmed he'd misunderstood one thing and become suspicious of another, Shiro chuckled softly.

First, the misunderstanding: that everything Shiro had said was an act.

...It was no act; she was literally trembling from nerves. That was real.

She had been terrified to the point that she could've burst into tears and run away at any moment.

That's right—this game Sora planned out, this summer festival...

Shiro even colluded with Foeniculum to get her brother and her together, alone.

She set the stage and the mood—all to make Sora feel a spark!

However—that was all she did.

What if he didn't feel a spark even after everything Shiro had done...?

What if after spending a week together in a space that amplifies feelings of love—he still didn't feel anything?

—This gamble could prove that Sora lacked even an iota of love and affection for his sister.

Shiro didn't think she'd be able to recover if that happened...

Hence why this was the biggest gamble she'd ever made.

But considering what she stood to find out, it was worth the risk!!

Her brother would never resolve the suspicions plaguing him in that moment.

Namely: Why had this happened to him?

It would be more than evident to everyone but him.

"Okaaaay, everyone!! It's the moment you've all been waiting for!! Today's main event!!"

Yes—this was the real goal of the summer festival!!

So this is the main part of your plan, Brother—how clever.

Tricking others into fighting among themselves—your skills as an agitator, a con artist, and a gamer are second to none.

But just as you've made abundantly clear, all things related to love fly right over your head.

When it comes to this game—A Space That Only Couples Can Leave—you're a complete amateur!

Indeed—her brother was the heart and soul of this game.

Shiro, not to mention Steph and Emir-Eins, knew this.

The same went for Jibril. It was blatantly obvious that the girls had their eyes set on Sora—and Sora alone—from the get-go.

The only person who failed to pick up on this was Sora himself—so much that he even tried to keep himself out of the festivities.

In a situation like this, where the viewers are able to affect the turn of events, the Fairies had just one collective goal.

That's right:

“You know what to do, bitches!! Send in your request to get Sora's love life in motion!! We're the race of love—with our powers combined, we'll show these fools what that word truly means!! C'mon, drop them tips!! WA-HA-HAAAAA!!”

Drag the main character off the sidelines and throw him back into the game!!

The moment that would receive the most tips for this summer festival—it was none other than when Sora felt his first spark of love.

In other words: the viewers' chance to make Sora realize his feelings for Shiro— *This very moment!!*

—There were sixty seconds left until the Fairies' request for Sora was chosen.

That minute felt like an eternity to Shiro.

...She wondered: Would they really be able to make that happen...?

—*I love my brother more than anyone else in the world.*

I can say with confidence that I love him more than anybody else loves him.

I think my brother feels the same way. I hope he does. I just think he doesn't know it yet; that's what I want to believe.

And I want to believe his sensor was set off by his love for me, even if it was only momentarily.

But still... It's hard to tell how much he really felt that way.

I'm so scared. I'm ready to just run away from here.

But Shiro kept herself rooted to the spot, no matter what.

Foeniculum told me to leave the rest to her. She's going to pull this off. Fairies know more about love than any of the other races in this world—and one of them told me this was going to work!

Her brother trusted Foeniculum; he trusted her enough to put their fates in her hands—so Shiro was going to trust her, too!!

...I've done...my part..., Shiro thought.

Show me what you're going to do next—show me something incredible.

Something that in a mere thirty seconds would make her brother realize his love for her, acknowledge Shiro as the object of his affections.

If there's really a way to make it happen—then show me.

Show me the abstruse, unknowable masterstroke that will win his love, a move so complicated it makes chess look like child's play.

Give me an unmatched, unparalleled answer that I'd never see coming—give it to me!!

“Shiro... There's something I need to confess to you.”

His sixty seconds had passed, and Sora—no.

Sora, under the control of the viewers, turned straight to Shiro and announced:

“I...like Loli girls.”

Yeah, I know. And?

He proclaimed a well-established fact about himself but nonetheless continued with grandiosity.

“Yes, I get off on cute Loli girls. And *you're* the reason I do!! You see, I've been romantically attracted to you—and then, as my sexual attraction to you grew, one thing led to another, and I started fapping exclusively to Loli content!! ...You asked earlier if we could ever be more than this, right?”

He took Shiro's hand and looked straight into her eyes with utmost sincerity—and yelled:

“There's absolutely no reason we couldn't. Now, Shiro, it's time for us to *truly* become one. It's time to unite... physically!!”

“What the hell?! That's a big friggin' red card for every single one of you nasty little shits!! You gotta be out of your damn minds to pull some crap like this!!”

Foeniculum was livid. She couldn't believe her viewers went with such a dirty joke.

As for Shiro—overcome with emotion, she could do nothing but shudder.

This is what the Fairies, the race of love, had him do? Talk about a god-tier move!!

You see, in terms of 2D characters, her brother was a complete and utter lolicon.

The average age of his favorite Loli characters was 12.344, 48.8 percent of whom were also little-sister characters.

And the notion that this preference of his was Shiro's doing—it was completely unprovable!!

True, he'd been physically forced to say those things just now. That wasn't how he actually felt. But now that he'd said it, he'd forever be plagued by the question of whether he'd ever seen his sister in a sexual light!!

This was because—albeit for a second—he'd undeniably felt a spark of love for her!!

—The Fairies... What a formidable race... This was the perfect check.

Shiro was only a few moves away from a checkmate, and there was nothing her brother could do to escape it.

Ultimate props, viewers.

All Shiro had to do was act less like his sister and more like a girlfriend.

That would inevitably cause her brother to see her in a new light...

Shiro's mind was going a mile a minute—however, she'd soon come to the painful realization of her own terrible oversight.

—From the perspective of the Fairies, the world's experts on love and romance, Shiro was no different from Sora on the subject. A complete amateur.

To think she could ever utilize the Fairies—beings categorically superior when it came to the game of love—to suit her own means was hubris to the fullest extent.

And thus—despite this rational conclusion, all Shiro managed to say was:

“.....Bwuh?”

Her cheeks as red as her caramelized apple, she could produce merely a single sound.

Just as her racing thoughts came to a stop and her head nearly burst clean off her shoulders—

“Bzzzzt!! There goes Shiro, down for the count!! Looks like

we're still in this, folks!! Sure, Sora doesn't know his own feelings...but the same goes for Shiro!! All right, here's where it gets interesting!! Now hit me with some requests for Shiro!!"

—Foeniculum could be heard walking her chat room through Shiro's punishment.

But it all sounded so far away... Those words never even reached her...

—————.....

——...

...The game continued after that point—as far as Shiro could tell, at least.

The viewers had Steph, Jibril, and Emir-Eins meet up with Shiro and her brother.

The two siblings were still sitting at one out each. With both present, though, the viewers were able to give a wider array of requests to the other three contestants—particularly in ways that added to Steph's number of outs. The Fairies grew even more engaged with the game, and their tips ballooned far beyond Sora's wildest imagination—or so Shiro would learn later.



...She wouldn't actually find out how things went until the following day.

Shiro had no memory of anything past the moment when her brain shut down.

All she could remember—and just barely at that—was what her brother had said to her.

It played over and over again in her mind in an endless loop.

"I've been romantically attracted to you," he said.....



Day Ten—Morning.

Two days had passed since the end of the summer festival event.

Sora left his room with the grimmest of expressions as he lamented to himself.

The summer festival game was a complete flop...

Yes... In just two hours, the gang had managed to raise up to 1,400,000,000 in tips.

Per Foeniculum—the channel's subscribers had increased phenomenally, just as Sora had intended.

More than nine hundred and seventy thousand viewers had tuned in to the last stream, and the amount they spent on the program went up with these numbers.

Even during their highlight reel shown the night before, the group managed to make another two hundred million.

Sora checked his smartphone—the current number of points shown was over 1,600,000,000...

The five billion soul points that seemed so far away—the amount they needed to buy a key—was within reach.

Just as Sora planned—nay, this was above and beyond.

...But those unexpected results came with an equally unexpected price...

To start off, the results of the summer festival game caught Sora by surprise.

Namely—the number of outs each player racked up.

Sora: 1

Shiro: 1

Steph: 32

The worst player came as no surprise. But Sora had no way of knowing Jibril and Emir-Eins would tie for second.

In other words, to fulfill the rules of the wager, *the two players who felt the most sparks* turned into three. Therefore, two couples were born from this game. And they were:

—Steph × Jibril and Steph × Emir-Eins.

...Steph was two-timing the both of them...

The following day was—and this is putting it as lightly as possible—a living hell.

Jibril and Emir-Eins soon discovered that Steph, of all people, had been cheating on both of them, thus trapping all three in a love triangle... Sora—who retreated to his room with Shiro and spent the rest of the day trembling beneath his covers and weeping—never learned the exact details of what happened between the three sides of that triangle. He did, however, notice the suffocating hostility in the air, so palpable that it seeped through his bedroom door.

Were it not for the Ten Covenants, the human race might have perished in the aftermath of this romantic tryst of epic proportions.

Sora only learned of the fallout the next morning.

He didn't even need to ask. What he saw that morning told him more than enough to get the gist of what transpired.

“Hee-hee, hey, Stephanie. There's something on my mind. Care to lend me an ear?”

...Steph was speaking to a reflection of herself in a mirror.

“When Jibril and Emir-Eins asked you who you really liked...you went and told them that you liked them both... Oh, I know, I know. You were forced to have those feelings. No need to think about it too much—yes, that's right. But look at yourself—you look like a girl in love.”

She then slammed her fist into the mirror.

“That's why I'm telling you to wipe that stupid look off your face!! Don't give me that *Oh, but there's no logic to love* crap!! You're failing to think critically!! Thanks but no thanks!! Stephanie, do you mean to tell me you're a trashy woman?!”

Even though a day had gone by, and she was back to her usual self, Steph couldn't get past what she'd felt while under the influence of Fairy magic. She was at her wit's end, fighting with her own reflection in the mirror.

Meanwhile...

“Then, how about we play a game where we wager each other’s lives?”

“Concern: Irregular Number is Master’s property. Estimating Irregular Number will not be able to wager her life without Master’s permission. Whatever shall we do?”

“...That does pose an issue. Oh, Master. Perfect timing. We’d like to play a little game where we bet the right to kill one another. Do you mind giving me permission to participate? ♪”

“Apology: This unit’s victory will result in destruction of Master’s property. Please forgive me. But do not worry. Both parties have agreed to administer a quick and painless death... It won’t hurt, I promise.”

—Murderous intent is, by definition, the intent to kill.

Death was the premise of their wager—it was their nonchalant premise—it was no longer a matter of intent.

The two living weapons calmly made the appropriate motions to hold an all-out death match.

Sora reconfirmed his diagnosis: The summer festival game was an utter flop.

It had thrown the group into more chaos than he could have imagined... Even this, however, was nothing more than *unforeseen repercussions*.

This shouldn’t have been too much of an issue, considering the game’s results were similarly unexpected.

The game’s second failure—this was something he couldn’t get over.

It was why he maintained the entire thing was a *massive* failure as opposed to just a regular one.

Namely...

“...H-hey, Shiro... D-do you think you can help me calm these two down?”

Sora turned to his room and called out for his sister. Her head could be seen poking out from the doorway.

“...?!”

However, she gave a small jolt and retreated to her room, visibly frightened.

—That’s right: Ever since the end of the summer festival, Sora and Shiro had yet to exchange even a single word.

This was a gargantuan problem—so much that it made everything else seem trivial.

The reason it was happening was all too obvious...

During the game, Sora told Shiro that he was romantically attracted to her—and sexually attracted, too.

Immediately afterward, she was thrown into a stupor that continued even after the game had ended, and she'd shut herself away in her room. Not only that, she and her brother were no longer sleeping in the same bed. Sora had spent the past two nights sleeping on the floor.

And of course she felt that way.

All this time, the person who'd treated her like a sister actually saw her in a lewd, sexual light.

The notion was more than shocking; it was straight-up psychological horror material.

It didn't help that Sora was so pathetically disgusting. *Traumatized* failed to do whatever Shiro was feeling justice.

It should have been plainly obvious that the Fairies made him say all that—and that there was no truth behind it.

And yet no matter how many times Sora told himself this, he would ask:

—*How can I be sure?*

He knew he couldn't lie to Shiro. He wouldn't allow himself to do that.

So he needed to be absolutely sure that he'd never seen Shiro that way.

—*Then why the hell did she set off your spark sensor?!*

Thus, a conflicted Sora determined that the summer festival game was a complete and utter failure.

But still—!!

He gritted his teeth and looked up. He needed to find a way to soldier through this conflict before it broke him.

This was his failure; he had done all the planning for the summer festival. His oversight was the direct cause for the entire group's distress.

His failure was why Shiro was so traumatized—he couldn't afford to let himself fold to the pressure while she suffered!

First, he needed to apologize. They'd talk it out once things calmed down.

Even if he failed to earn her forgiveness, and it cost him everything, he couldn't bear for things to continue like this!!

“Listen, Shiro. We need to talk. I—”

His mind made up, prepared for the worst, a stone-faced Sora approached his little sister to apologize.

Her shoulders twitched, her cheeks flushed bright red, and tears filled her eyes—then she screamed at the top of her lungs.

“___?! N-no... Stop... Don’t come, any closer...!!”

—————.....

“Mornin’, folks!! The love-triangle stream was a hit!! We’ll hit five billion soul points in no time flat at this rate, gweh-heh-heh-hehhh... So!! For tonight’s stream, I wanna hear whatcha think about— Wait, Sora, you’re not actually feeling down about the whole summer fest thing, are ya?”

An enthusiastic Foeniculum *poofed* into the house, only to find Sora lying on the floor like a corpse.

“...N-no... Brother... That’s not, what...I meant...!” A teary eyed Shiro said from afar; she couldn’t bring herself to get near Sora.

“I know—I’ll just swear on the Ten Covenants to *never love again!!*” Steph announced. “It doesn’t matter what the game is—I’ll lose no matter what we play!! That will rid me of these evil thoughts!!”

“What’s this...? Did little Dora just come up with a brilliant idea?”

“Affirmative: Mental destruction over physical destruction. Irregular Number can also wager her consciousness. Wow.”

At last, the three ladies slowly devised a fruitful method for self-sabotage, then spiraled further into mayhem.

“Sooo...about the game for the, uh, tenth day. You guys think you can swing it—? Yeahhh... That looks like a hard no,” Foeniculum said quietly as she eyed the group, to which Sora responded with corpse-like silence.

STFU. IDGAF about this game anymore.....

He’d lost his bond with Shiro.

In a life that amounted to a long chain of failures, this was the one thing he never wanted to lose.

I can’t recover from this. Why should I? I don’t even want to open my eyes... My own breathing and heartbeat are starting to annoy me, too. Why are they still functioning? They’re just wasting this planet’s precious oxygen... Stupid organs... Where do they get off, thinking they’re competent enough to keep me going?

Ugh—I just wanna curl up and die.

At least I’ll serve a purpose providing nutrients for the soil...

In spite of Sora’s doom and gloom...

“...Righto! I guess we’re takin’ the day off!! Have a good one!”

...Foeniculum offered a cheery comment and appeared to shoot Shiro a grin. “Won’t be much of a stream if the participants have a nervous breakdown. Luckily, we’ve made a ton of tips these past two

days. Go ahead and buy something nice for yourselves. You guys deserve it. Maybe some good food. Let's recharge and get back in the game!!"

No one was in any place to notice the slight chuckle Foeniculum let slip...



And with that—the game approached its tenth day.

It was the first day the group had to themselves, and they decided to spend it on their own terms.

Sora took Shiro back to their room, where he wrapped himself up in his blanket and parked himself in a corner by the door.

"Sob... Sh-Shirooo, please... Forgive your big brotherrr..."

Voice quavering, Sora repeatedly apologized to Shiro from beneath his blanket. Shiro, on the other hand—

"....."

—didn't answer him or even move. She just froze.

She stood on the opposite side of the room, by the window—where she frantically thought in silence...

Calm down... Logical thinking is your greatest asset...

You spent two days mulling over what's happened to you, and you've got nothing to show for it.

But if you calmly and logically lay out the events, you should be able to figure something out.

That's right; everything is going according to plan. This is all a part of the plan_____!!

As planned, she'd successfully made her brother see her as a lover.

As planned, he was now unable to shake his confusion.

Then what Shiro had to do next was not stand in place, trembling!

She needed to follow through with the plan: act like a lover and not a sister!

That was all that's left for them to become a couple—it's how Shiro would bring Sora into checkmate!!

Ah...isn't logic incredible?

1 + 1 is always 2. It'll never be 3 or 4, no matter what your emotions try to tell you.

Logic never betrays you. It's always objective and points you in the right direction...!

"Sob... Shirooo, please, don't hate your big brother..."

Therefore—logically speaking—it was clear what she needed to tell her weeping brother.

—*Me? Hate you, Brother? Inconceivable.*

That inconceivable misjudgment is what's causing you so much pain.

I need to tell you how I really feel in order to clear up your ridiculous misunderstanding.

I love you more than anyone else in the world—I love you as a member of the opposite sex!

Guided by her logic, Shiro finally spoke.

“...Brother, you're...wrong. I'd never...hate you... I...”

—*However...*

Shiro's throat tightened up; she couldn't get any more words out past that.

...What's going on? Why can't I say any more than this?!

“Wahhh, I knew it! I knewww you hated me! Dammmiiit, just kill me nowww!!”

“...N-no— Brother, that's not... A-ah—!”

Noticing that his sister couldn't physically bring herself to say she loved him, Sora finally asked to put an end to things.

He began slamming his head against the wall, but Shiro still couldn't find it in her to speak to him or approach him.

She frantically racked her confused brain to figure out what was going on with herself.

Indeed, you can always count on reason to remain truthful.

The only problem is: Reason can't possibly produce a correct answer without a correct premise.

—*What's happening to me?*

No longer able to put this problem off, Shiro once again turned to logic for an answer: *What is happening to me, why is it happening, and when did it start?*

First: When did this start? The answer was obvious.

The moment Sora was forced to say he saw Shiro as a girlfriend—and as an object of sexual desire.

So—what happened then? Also obvious.

Her heart rate and body temperature increased. She struggled to breathe, and her body started trembling.

From there, her thoughts came to a hard stop—so much that she couldn't remember anything that happened from that moment on.

So—why did this happen? *I...don't know.*

Everything had gone according to plan—or so she'd thought. But the fact of the matter was: Shiro's symptoms started the instant her brother confessed to her, and they weren't getting any better.

Rather, they were getting worse—and quickly.

—She couldn't even look at her brother anymore.

Her heart was pounding like a hammer on a nail. Her face felt hot. Her breathing was ragged.

But she still managed to sleep that night. Not in the same bed as her brother, but all that exhaustion made her pass out cold. She hoped that she'd be over these feelings come morning.

But when she awoke, the first thing that met her eye was the same thing as always.

The same sight as every morning for the past eight years—but there was something clearly different about it this time.

It was her brother's face. The moment she saw him, she almost lost consciousness again. She stopped breathing.

Even now, when he tried coming closer, her body temperature skyrocketed, and she wanted to run away.

Just being in the same room as him felt like a knife was being held to her throat. She was frozen in place and trembling. She couldn't move.

So back to the top—what was going on with her body?

I have...no...clue...!

This was a problem that logic and reason couldn't help her solve.

Unable to figure out anything, Shiro started crying—and conversely, Sora's sobbing stopped on a dime.

“Shiro, I'm sorry. But I—”

A determined Sora stood up and approached his sister, his expression utterly serious.

“...Eep?! N-no... Brother... Stay away, from me!!”

Shiro was terrified of her heart rate increasing any further.

She reached a breaking point, then screamed and tried to escape through the window into the garden.

But the moment she put her hand on the window—and pictured herself leaving her brother—

“...No... Brother... Don't leave me...!”

“What?! I'd never abandon you! Hold up—what do you even want me to do?!”

The mere thought of leaving his side was frightening enough to make her burst into tears.

—*I don't know anymore.*

She didn't know what was happening to her or what she wanted to do.

Everything was so hazy. All she could do was cry...until out of nowhere, she noticed her reflection in the window, and a new thought found its way into her head.

_____ *Who the heck is that?*

She didn't recognize her own face reflected back at her.

But at the same time, it wasn't totally unfamiliar—she knew that face pretty well.

She'd seen it recently—*very* recently... Whose face was this?

With her photographic memory, Shiro was able to instantaneously produce an answer.

_____ Her face looked like *Steph's*.

Steph, when she was looking in the mirror earlier. She'd called herself *a girl in love*, and this was the face she'd been making.

But that only raised further questions.

_____ *The face of a girl in love...? How does that change anything?*

Of course she was in love. She'd always loved her brother. From the moment they met—maybe from the moment she was born—long before that, even.

So if that was the case, then who was this person staring back at her in the mirror? *No, wait... That's not it.*

_____ *This was never me.*

Who was I up until now?

Now even more confused, Shiro struggled with further doubts—but the logical part of her brain never stopped working.

It was objective, uninterested, and merciless, and soon it delivered a new hypothesis: one that definitively explained what was causing her confusion.

And that was—what she felt in that moment was none other than love.

Could it be that all this time...I've never—

_____ *been in love before...?*



“Ooooooh, that's what I like to see!! Things are starting to get spicy!!”

Foeniculum, meanwhile, was secretly continuing the stream.

She and her viewers watched, their shared excitement reaching its climax.

_____ *Take a day off? At a time like this?! You're outta your damn minds!!*

We only need a few more days until we're at five billion—heck, if this game really pops off, we might even get there tonight!!

I mean, gawd, just look at this delicious turn of events—you bet your ass I'm gonna capture this on camera!!

Sorry, you two, but nothing that happens here is private!!

That's right—Foeniculum knew exactly where things were heading the moment she saw Shiro back in the living room.

The Fairy licked her chops as she nonchalantly and secretly captured every second of the drama, and thought things over...

Shiro figured she'd awaken her brother's romantic feelings for her. Unfortunately for Shiro, that was way too naive.

As the race created by the god of love, the Fairies know everything when it comes to (other people's) romantic entanglements, and it was as clear as day that Shiro was the one who'd never seen her brother as a potential love interest!

...Foeniculum didn't know their history, obviously. She'd only been acquainted with the pair for a short ten days.

Despite this, Foeniculum—along with her viewers—was fully convinced about Shiro.

I'm 100 percent certain that while she's probably toyed with the idea of being more than just siblings—

—she's absolutely, positively, never seen Sora as a lover!!

Maybe it was because she was still so young or because of how close they were.

Whatever the reason, what Shiro asked her brother during the summer festival game to get him to feel a spark of love—her trump-card question:

“...Brother—why can't you and I...be more, than this...?”

That told Foeniculum everything she needed to know.

Shiro didn't say the word “girlfriend”—she couldn't!!

She'd probably never entertained the idea before—maybe never even imagined it.

Foeniculum and her viewers picked up on this from Shiro's single question. Hence, why they had Sora say the lines he did.

You see, their goal was to have Sora view Shiro as a potential girlfriend—something they accomplished the moment Sora's sensor pinged him as out. With that said and done—why toy with him any further?

—They needed Shiro to view Sora as a potential boyfriend.

Why? Because it would make things way more entertaining!!

The most exciting part of a romance isn't when the characters get

together in books, movies, or real life.

It's the process of bringing them together—when they feel those first sparks, when their affection wavers, and then when it comes to fruition!

Shiro's feelings were a flame with eight years of buildup—a flame far too large for such a young girl—that was now wavering.

Just as Foeniculum and her viewers had intended, Shiro was navigating her first-ever romantic feelings.

They'd predicted everything perfectly up until this point; the Fairies had played their god-tier move just as Shiro desired. They were glued to their screens—for even a Fairy couldn't tell where Shiro's love would take her.

Blissfully unaware of these expectations that had been so fecklessly placed upon her—

“...Brother... I just...lost my cool, for a second... I'm fine now...”

“Y-yeah... I—I guess you kinda did totally lose it back there...but that's my fault—”

“...I'm...tired... Let's, take a bath...”

“Oh— Ookay!! Never mind that you actually want to take a bath for once—or that stone-cold look on your face; I'm just happy you're inviting me to do anything!! Let's go!!”

—Shiro was back on her feet.

After extending a monotone invitation, she grabbed her brother's hand and headed to the bath.

“Hooo boy... Yeahhh, I probably shouldn't record them in the bath without their permission...”

Foeniculum was conflicted.

She was recording the two in secret, which already put her in a moral gray zone.

Should she stop the stream? Foeniculum took a moment to think it over, and—

“I—I know! I'm gonna switch to audio only from here on out!! If things take a saucy turn in the bath, I'll halt the stream, barge in, and stop 'em—that should be enough for us to keep going!!”

It was a tightrope decision. Should she act a moment too late, a full ban was totally within the realm of possibility.

I can't back out now; my pride as a Fairy is on the line here!!

Giving in to her urges—not to mention the tips this would bring—Foeniculum decided to continue her stream.



“Aaah!! That hits the spot! Nothing like a bath after ten unwashed days!! Eh, Shiro?!”

“...Yeah, I guess...”

“We gotta thank Steph later! People need to keep clean, after all!!”

“...Yeah, I guess...”

Two days earlier—right before the summer festival—Steph had purchased a bath just as she said she would.

Shiro could hear her brother through the bath’s partition. He sounded unnaturally enthusiastic as he washed himself off in the shower.

Shiro sat in the bath alone, barely paying any attention to her brother as she became lost in thought.

—*Is this love? How ridiculous.*

This couldn’t possibly be love.

It was just—more confusion.

True, Shiro needed to figure out the root cause of her inner turmoil.

But she could save that for later. First, she had to follow through on her plan—bring her brother into checkmate. That was all.

For now, she’d use her powers of reasoning to shut out any disruptive emotions.

Plus...she’d already figured out how to force her brother into checkmate.

All she needed to do was embrace him while they were naked and say, *I love you in a romantic way, Brother*. He couldn’t claim that he’d never felt the same before; victory was all but in her sights—!!

“...Want to...join me...?”

“Huh? No way; you’re the one who’s always saying no underage nudity.”

I only say that ’cause I never want to go in the bath...

And now she was basically telling him to get his butt in there.

Shiro kept her impatience at bay—

“...It’s fine. I have, a towel on... You can just...wear one, too...”

“Aha. Nothing wrong with that, then. Don’t mind if I do.”

—and watched as Sora got up and approached the tub.

Needless to say—Shiro wasn’t wearing a towel. That was a giant lie.

The steam rising from the hot bath was really thick. What’s more, Shiro was submerged in the water.

Her brother wouldn’t be able to notice her lack of a towel until he was sitting right next to her.

By the time he figured out she was naked, she'd have hugged and kissed him and told him how she felt. Game, set, and match!!

—She watched as a figure showed itself from behind the partition.

Ba-dum. Her heart pounded in her chest, but she nonetheless waited, her powers of reasoning stifling any unnecessary emotions.

With every step her brother took closer to the bath, his silhouette grew clearer and clearer.

Shiro felt her temperature rise and her mind begin to go blank, but yet again, her reasoning powers took the reins. She waited some more. Finally, Sora was close enough for Shiro to make out his face—and in that very instant...

“_____A-actually!! Wait!!!!”

...Shiro heard the shackles of her reasoning being sundered apart as she jumped out of the bath and covered Sora's eyes with her hands.

“Gaaaah?! What's going on?! Now what'd I do?!”

—*Nope, nope, nope!! Can't do it!!*

Confessing to your crush in the nude?! No way—I could never!!

I'd have to be out of my mind—or at the very least, a straight-up pervert to do that!!

Shiro's sense of reason—which was now in shambles—posed a new question to her:

—*Why?*

Haven't you been naked around him before?

Didn't you kiss him—albeit under the pretense of air circulation—during your game with Jibril?

This is nothing new...so why the hesitation now?

Shiro's emotions, meanwhile, gave her sense of reason a giant middle finger.

I...don't know why, but...I just...can't!!

That was when reality sank in, dealing a fatal blow to her intensifying mental chaos.

She'd just pushed her brother onto the ground, buck naked, and had her hands over his eyes.



She could feel his warmth through her rear as she sat on him—her course of action led to a situation far more embarrassing than she could've predicted.

“B-Brother—y-you, big friggin’...perv!!”

“You’re the one who pushed me and covered my eyes, but *I’m* the perv?!”

Barely able to maintain consciousness at this point, Shiro mustered up everything she had to yell at him again.

“I—I just, can’t...! Brother...get away, from me!”

“S-sure thing! I’ll get away from you ASAP!! I’m not sure how you expect me to move while you’re sitting on me, but I’ll figure it out!!”

—Wait a sec.

The moment Sora moved away from her, he’d see...Shiro...naked —!!

“...Actually...don’t, move!! C-close your eyes, and...go back, to the shower!”

“I kinda need to move to get back to the shower, but okay, I get the picture!!”

Sora covered his eyes while he blindly made his way back to the shower area behind the partition. Shiro watched and thought...

—*I have no idea what I’m feeling.*

She was utterly clueless as to what was going on with her.

But as always, the logical part of her brain answered in its usual merciless fashion.

And rationally speaking, that answer was crystal clear.

—*This...must be what love really feels like...*

It was why it never bothered her when her brother saw her in the nude before.

It was why she could kiss him before, and she could say she loved him without a second thought.

—All because she’d never seen her brother as a potential lover...

Will he be grossed out if I kiss him or if he sees me naked?

If I’m pushy with him, will he think I’m weird? If I disappoint him, will he hate me?

These interactions came easily to siblings...hence why such thoughts and anxieties had never occurred to her before.

Yeah—I must’ve known for a while now...

This was love. She was experiencing her first love.

—*I know that. I know it! But—*

Whenever I saw my brother, I always calmed down.

Whenever he patted me on the head, it made any bad feelings go away.

Just burying my face into his chest was enough to make me fall asleep no matter where we were.

Just hearing his voice was enough to make me feel happy.

—But look at me now.

Whenever I see him, I worry if he hates me. My heart won't stop pounding when he touches me.

Whenever I hear his voice, I'm afraid of what he'll think about the way I feel.

Is this what it means to be in love?

This, of all things—?!

...If this, is love... If this is, what...being lovers means, then—I don't need it! I don't want that!! I don't want us to be...lovers!!

Her emotions were screaming inside of her, but her logical side—responded rationally.

—Okay. So what are you going to do?

I'll just...keep being his, little sister!! I don't...need all this...emotional baggage!

—Really? Are you sure being his sister is enough for you?

Let's think this through—let's assume you can go back to being his little sister after learning what love feels like.

Then what? What happens when he gets a girlfriend? Will you be happy for him as a little sister?

...Nooo... No way!! I'd, hate that—!!

She pictured her brother smiling and walking hand in hand with anybody else but her.

I can't take that. Never.

Just imagining it was enough to bring tears to her eyes. She felt the blood drain from her face and her legs go weak.

If that's what's going to happen...

...then I may as well destroy everything——!!

...Ugh... Anybody would hate...a girl like this...

She couldn't be his girlfriend, but she also couldn't go back to being his little sister.

I can't...do any of this...!

“Hic... Urgh... Wahhh... Ahhh...!”

Shiro finally began wailing like the child she was.

But then she felt a tight embrace...

“I’m sorry, Shiro. I’ll be honest; I have no idea how you feel right now.”

She could hear the strength and warmth in his voice as he suddenly hugged her.

“I know it’s my fault. But I don’t know how it’s affecting you. So I know I can’t just go and tell you to calm down. One thing’s for sure, though—I can’t bear to watch you cry all by yourself while I sit here and do nothing.”

—No, Brother... *This isn’t your fault...*

“So just tell me what you need. I’ll do anything. Doesn’t matter if you want to yell at me or hit me. I’ll do whatever it takes to make you feel better. I’ll change however you want me to if you’ll just forgive me. So please—don’t go crying all on your lonesome.”

It’s not your fault... So why are you being so nice to me...?

Why are you being so nice to a girl who’s acting this irrational?

My chest hurts. I can hardly breathe. I’m scared. This would be easier if you just got mad at me.....

His words only served to fuel her anxiety and confusion.

She opened her eyes in search of an answer—but through her tears, she...realized something.

It hit her suddenly—or calmly. She couldn’t quite tell either way.

...Hey. Brother... I’m naked...y’know...

Huh...? You’re hugging me while I’m naked, and that’s your reaction?

You’re not even blushing or...anything...?

Even though I’m so messed up? Th-that kind of—kind of...

...pisses me the hell off...

The next instant, Shiro felt the static clogging her mind dissipate.

You know what...? You’re right, Brother...

The reason I’m feeling this bad.

The reason I’m so anxious.

Why I’m scared.

Why I’m crying.

“...Yeah... This is alllll *your* fault, Brother. ♡”

As Shiro spoke, she started tapping her smartphone; she’d almost unconsciously brought the device into the bath with her.

And a split second later—everything in view was obliterated, the scene now unrecognizable.



CHAPTER 3 PARALLEL THINKING

POINT AT INFINITY

—The Spratul was flipped upside down.

An explosion rang out as everything vanished—not only the garden, but the entire building, too.

Sora was in the bath while Steph and the girls were resting in their rooms when the building disappeared—the four of them were shell-shocked at the wasteland that stretched as far as the eye could see.

“...Huh? Wha—? Huh...? Wh-what just happened...?”

A confused Steph asked a question that the rest of the group already knew the answer to.

The Spratul that Foeniculum had constructed was completely redesigned.

Someone had spent the stream’s tips to remodel the entire set, including their house. Actually, they weren’t yet finished remodeling.

Everyone aside from Steph could see who was responsible.

“...I don’t get it. I don’t get it. I just don’t get it...”

They spotted a figure floating high in the sky among a tumultuous maelstrom of black bubbles.

It was Shiro. She was looking down and mumbling to herself, black bubbles appearing en masse from her smartphone.

The group watched as with every word that left Shiro’s mouth, one of the bubbles popped and altered their surroundings.

This much was clear: Shiro was spending a vast number of points to remodel the space to her own liking.

That answered Steph’s question as to what *had* happened. The next question was: What was *going* to happen? No one present knew the answer.

All they could do was watch in fear as Shiro—with overwhelming ghastliness—quite literally redesigned the world and herself in a way that was nothing short of apocalyptic...

“I don’t get it, I don’t get it, I don’t get it, I don’t get it, I don’t get it—”

Their house and the garden were erased, leaving nothing but a blank stretch of earth that then turned into a barren wasteland.

Shiro’s long white hair grew longer, and the tips darkened.

—*Ugh, I don’t understand anything. Not a thing.*

“Romance, affection, lovers, little sisters—I don’t understand...any of it...”

As each word escaped her lips, another bubble popped in tandem.

The Spratul, a spatial phase boundary, was the Fairies’ domain.

And within the confines of their own domain, a Fairy’s powers were second only to a god’s—a power Shiro was harnessing for herself.

Mountains erupted from the ground and formed valleys; the bloodred sky swirled with storm clouds, Shiro at their center.

Clad in sinister, dark clothing befitting the atmosphere, she spoke once again.

“But—I do know one thing... It’s as *clear as day*...”

The world is an enigma. Few things are truly knowable.

So when people discover one of the few knowable truths—something abundantly clear—they cling to it, build their entire thought process upon it.

The only thing Shiro knew was what she could *never comprehend*.

Her answer to this massive doubt? Let the clearest emotion within her—irritation—take over.

Eventually, she remade the world into a fantastical hell and took the throne as its demon queen.

She lifted her gaze, exposing a grin as she looked down at her brother and announced almost in singsong:

“—Hey, Brother. Who do you think you are, acting so cocky?”

She was saying: *It’s all your fault I’m so upset.*

“Why do I have to worry so much about you in the first place? Weird, right? Hee-hee, hee-hee-hee— Ahhh, I feel great. My mind is working smoothly. This is the first time in my life that I’m thinking so clearly. Feels like I could solve all the universe’s mysteries! Heh-heh, heh-heh-heh... Ah-ha-ha-haaa!!”

Shiro spoke with a yet-unseen level of eloquence, her laughter exuberant enough to shake the heavens.

—Shiro usually had trouble articulating herself because of how quickly her brain operated. Her mouth wasn’t physically capable of

keeping up with her mind.

Therefore, her sudden eloquence was hard proof that her brain had ceased all thought.

What felt like clear thinking was actually a delusion created by a stark lack thereof...

Little did Sora and the others know—Shiro herself included—that this transformation signified, well—

“I am Black Shiro—here to give Brother his final judgment. ♡”

—a mental break.

Shiro was babbling in the midst of a blinding, all-consuming fit of rage...



“...Right! Now that things appear to be settling down, it’s time for some questions. ♪”

Steph managed to snap out of her stupor before the rest of the group—perhaps because she was the most confused of them all. She smiled, then shouted, “First! What made Shiro blow a gasket this extreme?! Second! What does she mean by Black Shiro?! Isn’t that an oxymoron?! Third! Why are you naked, Sora?! Would it kill you to put some clothes on?!”

“First! I’d like to know the answer myself!! Second! Another answer I’d like to know!! Third! I was in the bath—and I’m *not* naked!! Don’t be frickin’ rude! Can’t you see the towel?! This towel is the difference between a wholesome bath and breaking the law!! You better watch your phrasing!!”

“Being ninety-nine percent naked means you’re effectively one hundred percent naked!!”

“You can’t just write off that last percent!! Don’t you know it’s that very one percent that owns more than half the world’s wealth?!”

“I don’t want to hear that when you’re buck naked!! Just stay away from me until you’re covered!!”

“I *am* covered, though!! Wait—did my clothes disappear with the house?!”

A silent Jibril and Emir-Eins remained vigilant to their bizarre surroundings.

Meanwhile, Sora and Steph resorted to their usual back-and-forth routine amid the confusion, when...

“___That’s exactly what I’m talking about, Brother. ♡”

...Shiro—or Black Shiro, as she called herself—spoke up.

As she did, one of the bubbles popped, creating a massive pillar under Sora that lifted him into the air.

“Whooooaaaaa?! Now what’s happening?!”

“M-Master?! I’ll come save you right awa— What the?!”

“Report: Mobility compromised. Analyzing—Estimation: An invisible wall has been purchased?”

Jibril and Emir-Eins leaped into action once they heard their master’s shrill scream, but they found themselves trapped within an invisible cage—another product of Shiro’s tip spending.

Eventually, the pillar that Black Shiro had materialized reached eye level.

Wearing only a single towel, Sora quivered on top of the pillar. Were he to fall from this height, he’d surely perish.

“That’s exactly what pisses me off, Brother. You’re so pathetic. ♡”

Shiro, dressed in jet-black attire, sneered as she chided Sora.

“You’re antisocial—weak both mentally and physically—an absolute loser. And yet here you are, setting up these half-assed flags with beautiful women like you’re in some sort of C-list rom-com. Nothing pisses me off more. ♡”

She continued with a macabre grin. “You gotta follow through on all those flags. Didn’t they teach you that in school? Oh, that’s right. You didn’t go to school, ’cause you’re a pathetic NEET. ♡”

“Hey, I’m not the only one who skipped scho— Never mind! I didn’t say anything!!”

Shiro silenced Sora’s knee-jerk response with a smile before asking:

“Hey, Brother? Do you *actually* want a girlfriend?”

“.....Huh? Um.....?”

He did, from the bottom of his heart. Desperately. He thirsted for it like water in a barren desert.

Sora hesitated, unsure whether that was the right answer to give Shiro. But she simply asked another question.

“You want one, even though you can’t talk to girls without your little sister being there? Seriously, you can hardly even *breathe* without me.”

“_____”

“If you really want a girlfriend, then indulge me: What do you wanna do once you have one?”

“_____”

“You have no idea, do you? I *know* you don’t. And that’s ’cause I know *everything* about you. ♡”

“_____”

“Yep. Everything. I know every single thing about you, Brother.”

“_____H-hey, c'mon now—”

Sora tried to get a word in edgewise, but...

“Girls avoid you like the plague. Your personality sucks. You’ve got virtually nothing to offer outside of gaming. And you’re not even good enough at gaming to beat me without cheating. You’re like an infant who can’t even crawl yet. The multiverse’s ultimate lowest being, the bottom of the loser food chain. That’s the kind of loser you are. I know all this better than anyone else, no matter what you do to make yourself look good. Right, loser? ♡ Loooooser! ♡ C’mon, try to deny it. You won’t, ’cause you’re a looooooooooser. ♡ Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! ♡ Loooooser! ♡”

“.....I’m sorry...for even...being born...”

Unable to refute his sister’s assertion, the most Sora could do was apologize to all of creation for his existence.

“A loser like you, in a rom-com with a beautiful woman—no, multiple women? You’re not delusional enough to think you could actually ever date them, are you? That’s like a paramecium trying to date the world’s most popular superstars all at once. Surely you can see how absolutely insane that would be, right? Are you listening? Did I stutter? ...I’m asking you a question here. Answer me already, you loser. ♡”

“The only thing inherently wrong about all this is *my very existence!!*!”

“Ughhh, so annoying. ♡ Everything about you pisses me off. ♡”

Tears streamed down Sora’s face as he saluted his sister, which proved only to annoy her even further. She tapped away at her phone.

“But there’s good news for you yet, Brother. Everything’s gonna be okay. ♡”

She spent another chunk of points, producing a storm of bubbles...and off in the distance...

...something covered the gate with the A SPACE THAT ONLY COUPLES CAN LEAVE sign hanging from it.

“You just need some training, and Black Shiro will break you in nice and slowly—together, just the two of us—behind closed doors. ♡”

____Shiro had erected a massive castle.

She wrapped her brother in a gentle embrace and, with a kind, warm smile, told him:

“You’ll learn your place. You’ll learn not to be so brazen. You’ll never again dare to want a girlfriend. I’ll condition you so that you’ll

be desperate to apologize for even laying your loser eyes on a woman.
♡ Only then will you truly know your place. 'Kay? ♡"

The moment she'd finished, two wings sprouted from her back and she took off into the sky.

With Sora in her arms, Shiro flew toward the castle far off in the distance.

The only thing she left behind was her boisterous laugh.



"___Very well! I don't need to ask what's going on anymore. It seems fairly obvious at this point. ♪"

The three girls remained imprisoned within four invisible walls.

They were left speechless, completely taken aback by the intense turn of events.

Steph had been the first one to come to her senses. She then screamed:

"That castle is a cheap love hotel, isn't it?! It doesn't get more inappropriate than that!!!"

"" _____!!""

The two others gasped at the simple summation of the peril they faced.

Indeed, Black Shiro had flown away with her brother to a castle-themed love hotel.

A giant heart-shaped statue sat atop the castle, which was lit up in alluringly fluorescent purples and pinks.

It was a hotel as seedy as they come... It couldn't be misconstrued for anything other than a haven for perversion and depravity.

"Penitence: Competition incapacitated via utilization of tips, followed by disciplining, brainwashing, and bondage of Master—a brilliant idea. Why didn't this unit think of that? This unit is such an idiot."

"That's not what we should be regretting right now!!"

"...Lord Shiro is as cunning as always, I see. I'm quite impressed."

"You shouldn't be impressed, either!! We have to bring them both back here, or the world is going to fall apart—!!"

"But, little Dora, how are we to fight back without the tablet? It's nowhere to be found."

"W-we'll...just...!"

___How were they going to break out of their invisible prisons?

Both Jibril and Emir-Eins were unable to use magic in the Spratul.

To spend their tips, they needed Sora and Shiro's smartphone or the tablet they'd been borrowing—both of which Black Shiro had disposed of, along with their house.

The three ladies stood there in silence. They were out of options—or so they thought...

“Hoo boy, I really up and screwed the pooch on this one!! Everything happened so fast, I forgot to turn the video back on!! You guys only had the audio!! Oh, but don't worry, my dear viewers. ♣ I'll release the video of Black Shiro later! ♣”

Foeniculum chose this moment to burst onto the scene, shattering the silence.

“Just where have you been?! Wait, did you say sound only? Were you watching—no, streaming—this entire time?! Why didn't you stop Shiro?!” Steph shrieked at the Fairy, who had been recording them incognito.

“Me?! Stop her?! Why would I wanna do that?! We're just gettin' to the real interesting part!! In fact, things couldn't possibly get any better!!”

Foeniculum answered her with a question and a twisted grin.

“Geh-heh-heh, this is the perfect chance to rake in some serious dough. All I gotta do is make a few adjustments to the next game. This one's a Fairy classic. And it's called—”

Over-the-top background music played as Foeniculum announced the title.

“—the Save the Damsel in Distress from the Demon Overlord and Live Happy Ever After Game!!”

—A Fairy classic...

Jibril had mentioned something about a turf war—one where Fairies painted over one another's territories...

Nothing about this game's title suggested anything of that sort, though.

The three ladies squinted with suspicion, unsure what the rules might entail. Foeniculum ignored them.

“The rules are simple!! From here on out, we'll be providing each contestant with their own share of the tips!!”

The moment Foeniculum pointed, several *poofs* sounded.

Three small flowers manifested near Steph, Jibril, and Emir-Eins. They showed a flat panel of light—a touch screen.

“With the exception of our damsel—Sora—the four remaining

contestants can use their tips to buy soldier units! As a bonus, I'm throwin' in a stipend, enough to purchase one hundred soldiers each. Give it a try!!"

Jibril and Emir-Eins shot each other a cautious look.

Steph, on the other hand, appeared confused but nonetheless followed the directions.

She proceeded to tap the INFANTRY button on her screen.

Immediately afterward, a stream of bubbles surged from her flower screen and seeped into the ground.

"Eeeep?! There are so many of them!! And they all look like me with a huge flower blooming out of my head!!"

Steph shrieked as four clones of herself emerged from the earth.

""""Graaah... Urrrgh...""""

"And all they can do is make moaning noises?! This is getting creepy!!"

"...They look more like zombies infected by a parasitic plant..."

"Observation: Lady Dol often wears a flower in her hair. A vocabulary limited to *Graaah* and *Urrrgh* is similarly appropriate for Lady Dol's intellect. Conclusion: This is a horde of Lady Dol clones. The horror."

Steph didn't have a spare moment to get angry—especially at Emir-Eins's particularly rude prognosis—before Foeniculum went on:

"Eh, they're just a bunch of NPCs that'll shoot out soul points. I kinda skimmed on their appearance, so just ignore those li'l details! Anyway, see those flowers on their heads? They're loaded with soul bubbles that you can shoot at all the stuff Black Shiro made. That'll paint it back to normal!!"

The Fairy then began fiddling with her screen.

Just like she said, one flower-zombie-Steph raised a finger and launched a stream of bubbles, which stuck to the invisible walls before bursting with a series of loud *pops*. The popped bubbles splattered like paint, reverting the area around them back to the way it was.

The invisible walls dissipated, and the sinister terrain was once again a field of flowers.

"And since Black Shiro has her own castle, I'm gonna give you three your own bases, too!!" Foeniculum shouted. Three gargantuan flower buds appeared out of nowhere in the opposite direction of Black Shiro's castle.

"Here's the gist of things!! Contestants will purchase soldier units and deploy them around their respective bases! The units will then paint over the terrain and the enemy armies! Any units hit with soul paint will be out of the game!! There's two hours to knock the other players out of the battle and rescue Sora!! Once those two hours are

up, whoever holds hands with Sora wins the game and receives the coveted prize of coupling up for a day!!”

Once she had finished giving her viewers a rushed explanation—

“All right!! Now I just gotta get Black Shiro and the gang to agree to the game. In the meantime, please enjoy the footage from earlier while I figure this stuff out. ♣”

—Foeniculum started playing the video of Shiro’s fall from grace. After double- and triple-checking that both her mic and camera were shut off, she turned to the three ladies and said:

“So there you have it. You guys’ll be playin’, right?”

“...I suppose I should ask: Do we actually have a choice?”

“What’re you talkin’ about?! Of *course* you have a choice! Have I forced you to do anything against your will so far?!”

—Um, for starters, we’re trapped in your Spratul. Perhaps the past ten days of our imprisonment have all just been a figment of my imagination.

Foeniculum shrugged off Steph’s suspicious scowl. “Besides,” she added, “it’s y’all’s day off. Spend it however you want. Just bear in mind that the gate is inside that castle, and Black Shiro has her brother all to herself—who knows what’ll go down in there. ♣”

With a snicker, she hinted at the possible outcome. Of course, she wasn’t going to let anyone skip out on this game.

The three ladies exchanged looks—and reluctantly raised their hands to pledge by the Covenants.....



Shiro had taken Sora to her strange off-pink castle, where he found himself in an equally strange off-pink room.

This quote-unquote throne room featured the gate out of the Spratul behind a heart-shaped throne, along with a similarly heart-shaped bed. Sora, unbothered, was trapped in a cage.

“...Right-o, Shiro. Is it okay if your big brother asks what’s about to happen to him?”

“Hey, Brother—asking me to state the obvious is another thing that makes you a loser. ♥”

Shiro peered at Sora through the bars of his cage. She had a sphinxlike grin about her.

Sora nodded. “So it’s safe to assume that things are exactly how they look. Okay, fully understanding how much of a complete and total loser I am... There’s something I need to be entirely honest with you about... Listen well, little sister of mine.”

He looked directly into Shiro's lifeless eyes and told her:

"Your plan isn't going to work."

"_____♡"

Shiro paid no mind to Sora's firm gaze or to his warning. She took another step closer to him.

"It's blatantly obvious that you're making a mistake."

"_____♡"

Intense fear welled up inside him as his sister took another step closer.

"You said you're gonna train me—I'm not against this. If that's what it takes for you to forgive me, then train me all you want. In fact, if it'll make me even a half-decent person, then by all means, go right ahead."

However. Shiro took another step toward her brother, who maintained his resolve. "No eleven-year-old girl should have a thing like that in her possession. Put it on the floor right now."

Sora was looking at Shiro—specifically at the disturbing paraphernalia she clutched in her hands.

"And here's the most crucial part: The human anus is an exit and most definitely *not* an entrance!! This kind of discipline resolves personality defects only in pornography!! You shouldn't be capable of coming up with that kind of R-rated content!! And lastly—even losers like me have basic human rights, so I'm begging you here... Please stop what you're doing!!"

The resolve with which he tried to persuade his sister crumbled into groveling.

A teary-eyed Sora shrieked as Shiro approached him, intent on robbing him of his purity.

"Oookey-dokey! ♣ Sorry to jump in at the fun part, but I'm gonna have to stop ya there. ♣"

Sora's saving grace was the same voice that always appeared out of nowhere.

"This is supposed to be an all-ages stream. Let's keep it PG-13—and for gawd's sake, Black Shiro, wouldja put that away already?! You're gonna get our stream pulled!! Do you know how hard it is to blur that out in real time?"

Foeniculum *poofed* onto the scene and promptly snatched the X-rated object from Shiro's hands.

"Also, how long do you plan on staying naked, Sora? I get wanting to give the viewers some fan service, but keep this up and it'll veer into some nasty territory."

"Goddammit, I'm not naked!! And for the millionth time, I don't

know what happened to my clothes!!”

“All right, all right. Both yours and your sister’s clothes got blown away in the explosion, but I found ’em. Here ya go.”

“Hell yeah!! My favorite shirt!!”

“Our soul paint can’t destroy your personal belongings. Now hurry up and make yourself decent, will ya?”

Foeniculum chucked his clothes into the cage, which Sora donned as quickly as he could.

In the very next instant—he and Foeniculum gulped as they felt an intense aura emanating from Shiro.

“Why are you here...? Wait—you’re not gonna get in my way, are you? ♡”

—*Is an eleven-year-old Immanity girl supposed to be this terrifying...?* Foeniculum wondered.

The sheer intensity of Shiro’s gaze appeared to shake the castle walls. Foeniculum’s face spasmed.

“D-don’t you worry about that!! I’d never get in your way—I’m actually here to help you out, Black Shiro!! With a family-friendly game!!”

She barely managed to justify things before jumping into the game’s rules.

.....—

“—And that’s all you gotta do!! Whaddaya think?! Wanna give it a go?!”

Evidently, Steph and the others had already consented. Upon hearing Foeniculum’s explanation, Sora was the first to ask a question.

“So, uh... Between *Spratul* and *Sprite Tune*, I can’t help but notice a lot of things here sound like this one video game... So I gotta ask—you guys don’t know about our world, do you? I’m not gonna name names or anything, but the similarities are downright uncanny!!”

Shiro and Foeniculum ignored Sora and faced each other.

“Nope. ♡ I’m not gonna play your game. ♡”

A grinning Shiro answered bluntly and apathetically.

“Aw, really? ’Cause if you win, you and Sora will get to be a couple—”

“I don’t care about being a couple with him anymore. I just want him to never again think about getting a girlfriend. So I’m training him to do just that. That’s why I don’t wanna play your game. ♡ Kya-ha-ha! ♡”

She turned to her brother with a sinister grin, intent on getting

back to his scheduled discipline.

“Got it!” Foeniculum replied. “Then how about we add an extra clause for you if you win?!”

Shiro stopped on a dime at the Fairy’s proposal.

“If you can protect him from the other contestants for two hours, Sora *won’t be able to get a girlfriend for the rest of his life*. We can swear on the Covenants to make it happen!! How d’you like them apples?!”

“WHAAAAAT?!”

“.....”

Sora’s loud display of shock went in one ear and out the other. Shiro took a full ten seconds to ponder the offer before...agreeing to the conditions with a smile.

“Mm. I can live with those terms. All right—I’ll play your little game. ♡”

“No, it’s not all right!! Why’s it gotta be my neck that’s on the—?! Aieeee!!”

Sora couldn’t stop himself from speaking up, but he was promptly silenced by Shiro cracking a whip outside his cage.

“Sorry, Brother. I couldn’t hear you. Could you say that one more time for everyone? It almost sounded like you want to get a girlfriend despite how much of a total and utter loser you are... I must be hearing things, though, right? ♡ So—what were you gonna say?”

“Just that I’m a loser!! A big loser at that!! You guys go ahead and set up the game, goddamiiiiit!!”

A sobbing Sora relinquished his human rights to his younger sister, when—

“Excellent!! I’ll go give the others a refresher on the rules! Oh, and one more thing: In this game, you’re only allowed to use your own tip pool. Give it your all, okay?!”

—the PURCHASE button on Shiro’s smartphone was disabled. Foeniculum disappeared with a small *poof*.

A small flower appeared in midair beside Shiro. It had a built-in touch screen.

Shiro glanced at the screen before closing her eyes in thought. Sora joined her in mentally scrutinizing the game’s rules.

—They could use soul tips they received from the viewers to buy soldiers and place them on the map.

She needed to destroy her enemy’s units in order to defend her base and protect Sora.

“So this is essentially your run-of-the-mill RTS—a tower defense game. Piece of cake. ♡”

She snickered to herself and—without a moment’s hesitation—

began tapping away at her flower screen. Sora knew this version of Shiro all too well.

—She'd already calculated her path to perfect victory. At this point, all she needed to do was press buttons.

This was the face he wanted to see whenever they played on the same team.

That same expression meant her opponents' unstoppable and impending defeat.

Sora was neither Shiro's ally nor her foe in this game. He sobbed quietly to himself and thought:

Ah—fare thee well, potential non-bachelor Sora...



Thunder rumbled through the bloodred sky; the barren wasteland below stretched beyond the horizon. This eerie, postapocalyptic scene was rendered even ghastlier by the army of five thousand flower-zombie Stephs.

At the very edge of the horizon stood Black Shiro's base: the off-pink castle, where Steph's legion of flowery ghouls was heading. Steph watched from her own base—a giant flower bud—via her screen while she racked her brain to figure out how the game worked.

—It didn't take her long to discover that her soldiers would keep marching unless given specific orders to do something else.

Black Shiro's terrain was incredibly difficult to traverse—not only was there a valley filled with rubble, but she'd stationed her own soldiers who fired soul bubbles upon sight of enemy units. When these bubbles hit their targets, they splattered in a three-foot radius, reverting the area back to the one Black Shiro had created.

The game screens could display either a bird's-eye view or a first-person view of a single unit.

Players could also change the direction their army marched or select multiple units and have them concentrate their fire at specific locations.

However, just as Foeniculum had explained to the group, individual units came with a set amount of soul bubbles in their cranial flowers. Those units disappeared when their bubble reserves ran out.

Therefore, no one could afford to fire off soul bubbles indiscriminately.

Steph watched her army trudge through the valley without giving them any commands.

Having her soldiers fire bubbles into the valley reverted it back to its original flower field, which acted like a bridge and made it possible for her army to cross.

—Perhaps she should have taken a longer route in order to save on her soul bubble stock.

Steph finally had a handle on the game flow.

Come on now, Stephanie Dola... Come on!! You need to hurry!!

The rules stated that she needed to defeat Black Shiro and get Sora back within two hours—however!!

“An eleven-year-old girl just kidnapped someone—her brother—and brought him to a love hotel!! Stopping her within two hours isn’t exactly a cakewalk!! We need to save him before it’s too late!!”

Thus, every *ka-ching* that sounded signaled more tips going down the drain.

Without giving it a second thought, she bought more and more soldiers—and plowed her way through the quickest route to the castle.

The five-thousand-strong Steph army was currently crossing the bridge over the valley when all of a sudden the tail end of her troops vanished.

“_____What? What’s happening?!”

Her numbers were being depleted in the blink of an eye. She frantically switched to first-person perspective and saw something behind her rearguard troops—a Black Shiro with a flower blooming from her head firing some sort of beam—and then she lost the visual.

“What the heck is that?! She’s not shooting soul bubbles!! Is that even fair?!”

Her rearguard units were being blasted into oblivion by Black Shiro’s onslaught.

Steph screamed as the tragedy unfolded. Foeniculum’s voice echoed from the screen beside her.

“All’s fair in the battle of love!! Anyway, that’s just one of the equipment options for your units; take a look at your flower screen!!”

A panicked Steph fiddled with the UI and eventually found the options Foeniculum was referring to.

There were different kinds of units available besides the INFANTRY: 10 POINTS button Steph had been spamming, like SNIPER: 30 POINTS and PARATROOPER: 50 POINTS, among others.

...Evidently, she could’ve been spending more on stronger units this entire time.

The Black Shiro units firing at her were snipers, which attacked from outside her infantry’s firing range, rendering them defenseless.

“You didn’t mention these options in the rules!! Talk about a paltry explanation!!”

“You’re all in the same boat, princess!! What, you need the manual to spell everything out for ya?! Any gamer worth their salt has to figure out the tricks for themselves!!”

“Well, excuse me, but I’ve already come to terms with the fact that I’m a terrible gamer!!”

An upset Steph could only watch while her many soldiers were taken out in one fell swoop.

As the beam plowed through her units, it also turned the terrain back to Black Shiro’s desolate, bloodred creation.

That meant Steph’s flower bridge was gone, too. As it disappeared, the soldiers traversing it fell into the valley below. Meanwhile, Steph spotted figures overhead flying straight for her.

“___W-wait, what?! B-Black Shiro’s army has already made it this far?!”

“That’s what happens when you send all your units out of your base!!”

Steph shrieked as a small squad of paratroopers came speeding toward her.

“Um, uh, how can I fight off those paratroopers?! Should I buy some snipers? Wait—I’m out of money!! I need to pull my infantry back— Agh, they can’t make it past Black Shiro’s snipers!! ...Hold on... Is this already over for me?”

“Sheesh, you suck at this!! How were you ever the chief minister of Elkia?!”

“My work is primarily political by nature! Are there any administrative elements to this game?!”

“Handling military funds and keeping track of your units fall well within that territory!! You’ve already failed to do both of those!!”

...And just like that, almost too easily...Steph’s base was soul-bombed by Black Shiro’s paratroopers.

With every attack that landed, a big chunk of the base was vaporized, leaving behind gaping holes for Steph to see the paratroopers for herself.

...It was only a matter of time before the soul bombs hit Steph, kicking her out of the game.

Certain of her demise, Steph chuckled defeatedly...

“...Heh, it’s not even a question. I could never hope to beat Shiro at a game.”

“Uh, more importantly—I can’t believe you’ve survived this long in a world where games determine all things!! Damn, that’s some incredible luck ya got!!” Foeniculum shuddered at Steph’s incomprehensible handicap but then said, *“I’ll be honest, I don’t think even Black Shiro imagined*

she'd be able to take your base out this easily. She's probably more surprised than anyone!!"

"Heh, don't spare it another thought. I can even picture the look on her face; she likely knew this was coming."

"—I just took a peek at her, and you're exactly right... You're real perceptive, I gotta hand it to ya."

At roughly fourteen minutes into the game, this was practically a record for Steph.

A single tear glistened in the corner of Steph's eye as she looked up to the heavens and accepted her defeat. But then—

—she gaped in astonishment upon seeing Black Shiro's paratroopers get blown out of the sky.

—What was it this time?

Steph pulled up the view from one of her soldiers who'd managed to make it past the barrage of sniper fire.

"Oh... Right!! Why am I trying to do this alone?!"

It was a group of flower-zombie Jibrils—snipers.

Steph squealed with joy as they shot down Black Shiro's paratroopers.

That's it. Our goal is to defeat Black Shiro—it's a team battle!!

With Jibril and Emir-Eins on my side, we may just—

"—Nope! Nooooope! I know that's not how these things work!! I'm starting to learn what these nebulous flags are that Sora and Shiro are always referring to!!"

—She wailed an instant later when Jibril's snipers turned their rifles on Steph's infantry as soon as they'd cleared Shiro's units.

"...Why oh why must we fight even when we share a common enemy...?! Why can't we team up for this one...?!"

"I mean...you were the one who tried to charge in first for the kill."

"Charge in first...? I did no such thing!!"

"Then why didn't you try to team up from the very start?"

—What...?

"If your real goal was to stop Black Shiro, then working together should've been the obvious choice, right? But you didn't do that. Instead, you went solo for the chance of becoming a couple with Sora for a day. Am I wrong?"

"There's a key difference between this game and the others: By rescuing Sora and holding hands, at least one of you will become a couple with him. As long as all the players vie for this position, then they'll never want to team up—same goes for you, yeah?"

—Right.

Over the past ten days of games, no one had managed to couple up with Sora.

Steph found herself conflicted. Was this why she rushed her army's charge?

She was certainly eager to stop Sora and Shiro from doing anything unethical... Her intentions in this regard were earnest.

But could she truly deny having any desire—even an iota of it—to become a couple with Sora?

It was either admit her feelings, or—

“—I'm terrible at games; I simply failed to realize teaming up was an option!!”

—admit to her incompetence. And after a moment of hesitation, Steph chose the latter.

As soon as she shouted her reply, she caught sight of Jibril's units. They were already at her front door.

Steph held up both hands before any of them could begin firing.

“Heh-heh... Go ahead. Pull the trigger... But promise me this.”

Steph accepted her impending defeat and smiled with relief.

“—Protect everything that is ethical and peaceful in this world. I'm counting on you, Jibril...”

With that grim final wish, Steph closed her eyes and waited for her death—

“Um... I'm not going to shoot you...”

—only to be answered by a shocked yet cheerful voice.

“I can't have you give up yet. I certainly won't be able to defeat Black Shiro on my own.”

The voice was coming from within the horde of flower-Jibrils.

...Upon closer inspection, one of them lacked any cranial flora.

Steph's jaw practically dropped the moment she realized it was the actual Jibril speaking to her.

“Wha—?! Is that you, Jibril?! Wh-why are you here?!”

“Well, there's no rule that states a player can't leave their base. ♪”

—Their objective was to render the other players unable to fight.

There was indeed no rule that prevented the players from leaving their respective bases.

Moreover, Steph's base was fairly easy to reach, given its lack of defenses.

Jibril smiled confidently. “Furthermore...I was listening to your debate earlier, so allow me to retort: *It is possible for us to team up.*”

“...Huh?”

She went on to explain how that was precisely why she'd come

here.

“With Lord Shiro—that is, Lord Black Shiro—in such a state of disarray, I thought there might be the slightest of chances that I could defeat her. However, this was not this case... In fact, she appears to have an even greater edge to her than usual.”

Jibril showed her screen to Steph as she spoke.

—It displayed Black Shiro’s troops moving every which way through a set of ruins.

Despite having fewer numbers, she was able to position her units exactly where Jibril could least deal with them. They were getting crushed.

“The only way to outdo this overwhelming advantage in skill is to create an overwhelming advantage in numbers—we need to work together.”

“B-but...”

“Yes, as the Fairy already stated, this shouldn’t be possible so long as the three of us want to become a couple with Master. In which case—we simply rid ourselves of this desire.”

Jibril spelled out the one way to make this happen, which was:

“We will swear on the Covenants not to hold hands with him at the end of the game.”

“_____?!”

“If you swear with me—then we’ll be able to team up, won’t we?”

—*Sh-she’s right!! We can’t work together if we’re all after Sora. But if we throw that possibility out the door, then we’ll be able to cooperate!!*

It seemed unlikely that Emir-Eins would forfeit her desire to couple up with Sora...but still.

If Steph and Jibril banded together, Emir-Eins would have no reason to fight solo—

“B-but then...what will you be fighting for, Jibril...?”

Steph questioned what the Flügel stood to gain in this strategy.

“It’s quite evident that Lord Shiro—or Lord Black Shiro, I should say—has lost her mind,” Jibril replied with a tormented expression. “If Lord Black Shiro emerges victorious from this game, Master will be unable to fall in love with anyone—not just for the duration of this game, but for the rest of his life.”

“_____!!”

“Though I am hardly capable of even understanding romance and affection, there is no doubt in my mind that these are Lord Shiro’s true intentions.”

—And although Jibril claimed she couldn't comprehend such emotions...

"I, therefore, have no choice but to achieve an outcome that defies my master's wishes—and indeed, Lord Shiro is one of my masters."

She cherished her duty as a servant over her own feelings.

She was going to prioritize those most important to her—the people she loved.

"We must prevent Lord Black Shiro from winning this game. That is my only goal, Dora. Will you join me?"

Steph felt her chest tighten as Jibril bowed down before her.

She's right—my true goal is to bring Shiro and Sora back from that love hotel.

And just look at Jibril. This elegant, proud, beautiful angel is asking for my help. I couldn't possibly turn her down!

"A-all right!! You've convinced me. I'll work together with you—"

She gazed lovingly at Jibril and went to take her by the hand—

"Foolishness: Reconfirming stupidity of the Flügel race. This unit is flabbergasted. *Siiigh...*"

—but just then, someone appeared from the gaping hole in Steph's base opposite the one Jibril had entered.

It was Emir-Eins, here to stop this alliance. She, too, stood among an army of soldiers that looked exactly like her.

—*Do you people think my base is some sort of public park?*

Yes, come right in. You're welcome to just stroll on through...

Steph half expected Shiro to show up as well. Her gaze grew empty and distant.

"Declaration: Impossible to form alliance by forfeiting desire to hold hands with Master. Pointless. A foolish idea. Stuuupid."

"What's this...? Is that how you say 'please kill me' in your robot language? You learn something new every day. ♪"

Jibril's desire to team up flew from the gaping hole in Steph's base the minute she was provoked.

Emir-Eins calmly ignored Jibril's palpable murderous intent.

"Recommendation: Reconsider the purpose of personal tip allocation."

—Personal tip allocation.

She was referring to the tips each player received to purchase soldiers.

Why would the viewers—Fairies looking to see real, passionate love—send tips to one person in particular?

Emir-Eins was questioning their support for individual players.

Steph and Jibril gulped.

“Self-Evident: Viewers send tips to the individual they wish to see coupled with Master. They are backing their favorite player. Revelation: The true object of this game is a tip war to determine the best couple.”

How could this notion possibly go unnoticed? A disturbed Emir-Eins continued.

“Inevitability: Forfeiting any desire to become a couple will end the possible outcomes of Master × Lady Dol and Master × Irregular Number. Fans of these combinations will no longer send you two tips. Building an army will become impossible. Banding together is pointless. Stuuuupid.”

“_____”

Even Jibril’s expression tightened up when an expressionless Emir-Eins scoffed at her and Steph.

____Right... This is why Foeniculum said they wouldn’t be able to fight together.

If Steph and Jibril forfeited their desire to become a couple with Sora, then Sora × Emir-Eins fans would be the only ones sending in tips.

That would essentially amount to Emir-Eins fighting Black Shiro all alone...

“Thank gawd you finally figured it out!! Ya had me scared the game was gonna end there for a hot second!! As the game master, it kills me that I can’t drop you guys any hints!!”

The three ladies were relieved to have finally realized the purpose of this game, although Steph howled in fury at Foeniculum.

“Why didn’t you just tell us that in the first place?!”

“Cause it’s more interesting this way!! Now that you’ve figured this out, what are you gonna do?! This is where the real game begins!!”

____That was indeed the most pertinent question here. Now what?

Setting aside Steph as she thought about the problem at hand...

Outwitted by Emir-Eins, Jibril was shaking with embarrassment. Practically groaning, she spoke up.

“.....I see. So our goal is to hold hands with my master. That being said, we still have a shared interest in defeating Lord Black Shiro...”

She’s right! Our goals align until we’ve defeated Black Shiro!

Jibril’s new suggestion had Steph excited—but that excitement was short-lived.

“Idiot: Irregular Number’s intelligence is astonishingly low.

Implementation of negative IQ scores recommended.”

“.....You should thank your lucky stars that I’m doing this for our masters. Otherwise, I would have blown a fuse long ago, despite all my benevolence. ♪”

It took every fiber of Jibril’s being not to wring the cyborg’s neck, however—

“Question: Irregular Number, do you think we could possibly defeat Black Little Sister with merely three times our current power?”

“_____!”

Jibril gritted her teeth, unable to argue otherwise.

A few moments passed before Steph caught on.

Emir-Eins was right... Even if they did join forces, that gave them only three times the firepower.

And that might not even be an accurate estimate. It was anyone’s guess as to who was more powerful; that depended on whom the viewers most wanted to pair with Sora.

And this was Black Shiro they were up against.

____The one and only Shiro...

She, together with Sora, made up Blank—and even without Sora, she was the stronger gamer of the two.

Not only that, but she was on the defensive—this was incredibly advantageous. Just as Jibril had stated earlier, they weren’t going to be able to compensate for that overwhelming advantage in skill with just any numbers—they needed equally overwhelming numbers.

“Huh, b-but—do you mean to tell me that you think we’ve already lost?!”

Emir-Eins wouldn’t come all this way just to tell them victory was futile.

She must have had some sort of answer.

Surely she was going to offer a way to defeat Black Shiro!

At this point, even Jibril was willing to rely on Emir-Eins for a solution.

Her face contorted from her sheer reluctance, Jibril waited for her sworn enemy to speak.

“Cooperation: We shall form the Girl-on-Girl Alliance.”

An intrepid grin spread across Emir-Eins’s expressionless face as she gave them her answer—an answer that left Steph and Jibril equally confused...



____Roughly one hour had passed since the game began.

Shiro dealt with Steph and the others’ armies all while continuing

to discipline her brother.

Even with the PG-13 restrictions in place, she chose the cruelest methods of breaking his spirit bit by bit...

“All right, Brother. Let’s say it a few more times. You are—what was it? ♡”

“A loser. Despite my rock-bottom social standing, I commanded the beautiful Steph to fall in love with me. And yet I neglect her, because I’m a loser. The unattainably gorgeous Emir-Eins has feelings for me, which I neither affirm nor reject in the vain hopes that something will develop naturally. I didn’t feel a lick of regret when the stunning Laila referred to me as her darling, and—”

That’s right... Sora was going through the long list of misdeeds he’d committed over the years.

“—I’m a total pathetic loser at the very bottom of the loser hierarchy, where I belong— Eek?!”

Sora finished his spiel with lifeless eyes but was met with a crack of Shiro’s whip.

“You’re a total pathetic loser at the very bottom of the loser hierarchy of *all living beings*, where you belong—you can’t even remember a simple sentence? Loser. ♡”

“It w-was highly inappropriate for a loser of my caliber to go and twist your words. I merely find it a bit difficult to compare myself to other living beings, considering how much of a gargantuan loser I am...!!”

Sora had spent the last hour getting his inferiority drilled into his head.

It had reached a point where he felt as if other living creatures, no matter how insignificant, shouldn’t even be lumped together with him just to prove his loserhood.

And yet Shiro smiled tenderly at him.

“...You’re not the only one, Brother. There’s other losers like you—other antisocial lady-repellant virgin NEET shut-ins. That’s why it’s important to include all other life-forms in our comparison. And there’s only one girl in the entire universe who will ever accept you the way you are. ♡”

—*Bullshit... That’s not even possible.*

A girl like that could exist only in fiction. She’d have to be a living goddess.

Sora slowly raised his head to argue as much, and then—

“See? She’s right here, Brother. ♡”

—through the iron bars of his cage, he laid eyes upon her: a living goddess, smiling at him...

“Come on, Brother. You know that by now, don’t you? ♡”

—Ah... Ahhh...

Shiro’s sweet whispers traveled through Sora’s ears and implanted themselves into his weary brain.

“No matter how big a loser you are, Brother, I’ll always be there for you. ♡”

—Ahhh... Ahhhhhh...

Her voice melted through his sense of reason before corroding every crevice of his mind.

“I’ll make all your food. I may not be the best cook, but I can learn. I can take care of you in other ways, too, like with money. All you have to do is let me pat you on the head while you play your mind-numbing games. There... That’s a good boy. ♡”

He could feel the warmth of her hand stroking his hair through the iron bars.

Sora’s thoughts began sinking beneath the intense weight of Shiro’s tender love—a love that accepted him for who he was.

“Sorry for being so hard on you. But it’s all for your own good. ♡”

—Hard on me? What’s she talking about?

Sora couldn’t come up with a single thing she’d told him that fit that description.

Everything she’s said so far is an undeniable fact... This goddess is merely enlightening me.

Intent on giving in to the sensations on his scalp...Sora closed his eyes—

“I’ll make sure aaaall your desires are met, Brother... Even your carnal—”

“...Aaaand stop right there. Time out. You sailed right past that foul line...”

Foeniculum appeared out of nowhere, just in the nick of time to bring Sora out of his trance.

—Whoa?!

What the—? What was I just thinking about?!

“Grrr—why do you keep stopping me?! I had Brother right where I wanted him!!”

“You were starting to get a li’l too descriptive... Try to allude to it more without actually saying it. We gotta keep things PG-13, after all... Don’t get me wrong, I feel bad about jumping in on things, but rules are rules...”

Sora gasped in utter shock even as Shiro lashed out at Foeniculum.

—H-holy shit!!

I was this close to being my little sister's sugar baby...!!!!

Calm down. Think this through, Sora, eighteen-year-old virgin!!

I had some hope in Shiro's ability to help facilitate my evolution from loser to decent human being, but becoming my eleven-year-old sister's gigolo?!

That would bring me from loser to something worse—it'd make me the scum of the earth!!

A fierce conflict unraveled within the confines of Sora's mind as the two girls bickered.

“Also—as the game master, I'm not really supposed to say this, but...it'd make for a pretty lame ending if you lost without your head in the game. Maybe focus a little more on the task at hand.”

Foeniculum's grimace was met by a suspicious scowl from Shiro. Only a short amount of time had passed since she'd last looked at the screen, which she turned to once more.

“—What...the...?”

Shiro's relentless grin finally vanished as she groaned in shock.

The screen—which had once shown her army obliterating Steph's—now had her own army being painted into oblivion with the enemy's advance.

“H-how did they get this strong? ...No—how did they get this many units?!”

It wasn't strategy or positioning that allowed the girls' forces to overpower Shiro's.

It was raw numbers. The trio's units engulfed Shiro's army like a tidal wave.

“What's...happening?!”

Shiro merely wailed in confusion as she watched the unmanageable disparity in numbers play out.



So—what was happening?

The answer to Shiro's question could be found in the unlikely spot: Steph's base.

“Now, what should we do next? Should we have little Dora strip for us? ♥”

“Uuuuhm?! Would me stripping actually serve any purpose?!”

“Negative: Significance of Irregular Number stripping Lady Dol exists. This unit may also do the stripping. Selection: Whom would you like to strip you?”

“You want me to pick?! But I...can't pick between you two— No, I

don't want either of you to strip me!! This is going on the Linkernet!! I'm not into undressing in public!!"

"Don't be shy, Dora. I've seen your body before. There isn't a single inch of you that you need to feel ashamed about. ♪"

"_____What? Wait... J-Jibril, does that mean—?"

"Evaluation: Now that's what I call girl-on-girl, Irregular Number. Massive amounts of incoming tips confirmed. This unit will reinforce the right flank of our front line."

"Is that so? We should have you play with Dora next; that will give me a chance to increase my numbers as well."

"Hey!! Heeey?!! I'm a person, too, you know! You can't just play with my emotions like this!!"

____The more the girls canoodled, the more the tips came pouring in.

Every time the trio partook in girl-on-girl play with each other, a violent symphony of *ka-chings* followed, which in turn meant Jibril and Emir-Eins purchased more and more soldiers.

This was what was happening.

This was Emir-Eins's *Girl-on-Girl Alliance*...

_____.....

_____.....

____Forty-six minutes earlier:

"Cooperation: We shall form the Girl-on-Girl Alliance."

A puzzled Steph and Jibril listened as Emir-Eins began explaining her idea.

"Amendment: We three cannot join forces because the only form of support we'll receive will be on an individual level: for each of us to become Master's girlfriend. New pairings must be formed."

And by that, you mean...? the other two ladies' gazes implored. Emir-Eins calmly continued.

"Confirmation: The rules state: Two contestants who finish the game holding hands will become a forced couple for a day. This is not limited to a single couple. This unit presumes two contestants other than Master can be paired up as well."

Emir-Eins pointed out a loophole in the rules before elaborating.

"Proposal: We players should create our own rules: She who captures Sora and Shiro one hundred and eighty seconds before the game ends will be deemed the winner. Losers will surrender unconditionally. Winner dictates which two couples will form. These will be the terms of our alliance, which we three will swear on the Covenants."

"...Um, huh...? What happens after that?"

Steph wasn't following. Jibril jumped in to help her.

"We'll be able to receive tips from individuals who support our pairings."

"Affirmative: Specifically, viewers who ship Irregular Number × Lady Dol, this unit × Lady Dol, and this unit × Irregular Number. Tips may also come from those who ship Little Sister × Lady Dol, Little Sister × this unit, and Little Sister × Irregular Number—expanding the tip potential for a total of nine different possible couples."

In other words, they were going to work together until they defeated Black Shiro and won Sora back, and then—

"Wait a moment—that doesn't really count as us working as a team, does it?!"

"Yes, that's what makes it an alliance. ♪"

"Affirmative: Defeat Black Little Sister and rescue Master—this is the common desired objective among all viewers except those who ship Little Sister × Master. The alliance will cease once the objective is complete. We will return to our respective bases to resume the turf war—the battle for who will take Master's hand. *Krieg*."

In other words—they weren't just vying to pair up with Sora.

They were also inciting a tip war that would decide a second pairing.

Emir-Eins had come up with this plan, which Jibril comprehended easily. Meanwhile, Steph thought...

...They're both starting to sound like Sora. He's poisoned their minds...

And thus, the three raised their hands and made the famous unbreakable pledge:

Aschente—...

—————.....

—————.....

And thus, the fans of girl-on-girl action proved to be lucrative tippers. The trio's alliance had amassed well over three hundred thousand units—

"Um!! I can't keep up with the controls!! Can somebody please help me?!" Steph shrieked as she failed to maneuver so many units at once. "Is it just me, or am I getting way more tips than both of you?!"

"Obvious: Viewers' most desired pairing: this unit and Irregular Number. Clearly."

"And in order to give the viewers what they want, you, Dora, need to earn the most money. ♥"

They were correct—the viewers wanted to see a Flügel × Ex Machina couple.

In order for that to happen, Steph needed to be the one to capture Sora and Shiro.

Unfortunately, Steph didn't have the gaming prowess to see this through. What happened at the start of the game spoke volumes to this fact.

Therefore, to make a JibEm couple happen, the viewers needed Steph to defeat the two women after the trio's alliance defeated Shiro—the odds of which were practically zero if Steph was left to her own devices. The viewers knew they needed to pump Steph's army with cash while the Girl-on-Girl Alliance was still in play.

The problem was, Steph's army had grown too large for her to control properly.

She needed Emir-Eins to help guide her, and even then her units weren't fighting at a reasonable capacity for their size.

Both Jibril and Emir-Eins wanted to work on their own armies, but—

“Revelation: The Girl-on-Girl Alliance can bring in tips for purposes other than changing the outcome of this game.”

And thus, Emir-Eins revealed her second ace in the hole.

“Announcement: If this unit amasses four hundred thousand points in tips—this unit shall kiss Irregular Number.”

“_____Wait, what?! Are you being serious, Emir-Eins?!”

Emir-Eins is going to kiss somebody other than me? Jibril of all people...?

As an emotionally perplexed Steph shrieked, Jibril put her foot down.

“Not in a million years. ♪ I'd rather lick a pig's ass. ♪”

“Agreement: Kissing Irregular Number... Ew. But we must face the truth. We need *more power*.”

This was true—as hard as it was to believe.

Despite their insurmountable advantage in troops, the Alliance had yet to overwhelm Black Shiro.

They needed even more tips, or else she was going to take them out.

“Presentation: Increased tip procurement possible should Irregular Unit make a similar offer. Current firepower is too low to defeat Black Little Sister. Question: Will Irregular Unit put her own inhibitions before her master?”

“_____! _____!! ~~~~~!!!”

...Jibril couldn't come up with a single retort.

She clutched her head; her expression twisted from the inner conflict she faced—a rare sight.

Steph watched with bated breath—until Jibril finally made her decision.

“...How about if we’re tipped over four hundred thousand points, I’ll kiss little Dora?” she forced herself to say.

“Wha—?! Why me?!” Steph replied with a shriek.

Emir-Eins nodded. “Test: Appropriate firepower must be acquired by whatever means necessary. But let it be known: This unit will do anything to defeat Black Little Sister and steal Master back. *Anything.*”

They could give kissing a trial run, but Emir-Eins was willing to go way further than that—even by kissing Jibril.

“So...Dora. Do I have your consent?”

“Ummmm?! My first kiss isn’t for sale!!”

“Of course, Dora. I won’t force you to do it... If you really don’t want to...”

“Wait, Jibril—don’t look at me like that!!”

—*Calm down. Calm down this instant, Stephanie Dola.*

You only feel this way because this space amplifies your love for others

—

Steph convinced herself to turn down the dejected Jibril; she knew her feelings for the Flügel were mere delusions—

“Opportunity: This unit shall also kiss Lady Dol for four hundred thousand points. Only if she wants to, though... Do you not want to share a kiss with this unit?”

Emir-Eins made a similarly sad puppy dog face and approached Steph from the opposite side of Jibril.

...No, you see... I-it’s not—like that—

.....

And thus, a teary-eyed Steph agreed to their terms, so long as it was on the cheek.

“Report: Just barely able to procure necessary firepower. The right flank is moving in to destroy the final line of defense.”

“Then leave the left flank to me—this is our last push. ♪”

The two women homed in on Black Shiro’s last line of defense with a kiss.

Steph, meanwhile, had her hands on her cheeks, both of which had been kissed by Jibril and Emir-Eins. She stared off into space.

...Oh, dear grandfather.....

Your darling Stephanie just sold her body for money...

That said, she was less embarrassed about being kissed than she was relieved that she didn’t have to pick between the two women.

In fact, Steph was in tears because her heart was beating so fast

from the two kisses.

—*No matter how this game ends, I may find myself at a loss.*

Because even if they beat Black Shiro, rescued Sora, and by some strange miracle, Steph came out on top...

—*Whose hand will I hold...?*

The agonizing decision had shattered Steph's heart into pieces...



—There was no way to know how many units another player commanded.

Yet despite her perfect positioning and controls...Shiro's army was being dominated.

Shiro quickly figured out that her enemies had amassed more than twenty times the man power of her own troops.

She had no clue how Steph and the others had managed to pull it off.

Rather—she couldn't tell how they'd managed to join forces.

Nevertheless, the trio's combined armies were tearing through her defensive line, so Shiro furiously revised her tactics and worked desperately to resist the onslaught.

“...Hey—why am I not good enough for you...?”

The words slipped out of her mouth as she tapped away at her screen—but her question...

“Mmmnn?! Mmmnn, mmmnn! Mmnnn?!”

...wasn't for Sora, who flailed around in his cage, bound and gagged.

“Even though...I can do anything Brother wants me to?”

It was for the great army that pushed through her defensive line.

“I can even make him food—maybe not as good as Steph can, but I can try.”

For the people who made that great army possible.

“My boobs may not be as big as Jibril's, but they're still growing.”

Those who were funding Steph and the others.

“I may not be as beautiful as Emir-Eins! But I'll learn how to do my makeup and wear pretty clothes!!”

Her question was for...the viewers.

“I can't become his girlfriend like they can—but I can do everything else!!”

She was making a plea to Sora × Shiro shippers out there.

“So why...? Why aren't you giving me any tips?!” she screamed—

cursing those who tried to steal her brother away from her.

And yet Shiro already knew the answer to her own question.

This was a game for the viewers to decide who would become Sora's girlfriend.

Were Shiro to win, the game would end with Sora single—not only that, but he'd never be able to get a girlfriend for the rest of his life.

The Fairies wanted to see love and romance; only a handful of them would even consider supporting Shiro's outcome.

—I know this. I know this, but—!!

“...Is finding love...really that important...?!”

The great army had made its way to her castle.

She was about to lose. Picturing what that would mean, Shiro shouted herself hoarse.

“Is it wrong for me to want to be with him forever, even if we can't be lovers?!”

—Her brother was going to hold hands with somebody other than herself.

Even if it was only for a day, Sora and his girlfriend were going to share a tender gaze, a genuine smile...

“...No... I don't want that to happen... NOOO!!”

Shiro imagined the scene—and finally began crying.

Large tears ran down her cheeks and landed on her screen as it displayed what was unfolding—and she knew.

There was no longer a way for her to stop the great army that had broken through her defenses...

Falling to her knees, a sobbing Black Shiro—no...

“...I...only have Brotherrr... I don't need, anyone else...!!”

This was Shiro doing the crying. She'd unknowingly released herself from her delusion.

“...Don't take...Brother away, from meee...”

This was her only plea; her sole desire.

Without even realizing she was back to normal, she screeched at the top of her lungs:

“—Don't, leave me all aloooone!!”

Shiro covered her face with her hands and began wailing. She didn't even notice who was standing behind her...





—An hour and forty-seven minutes since the game’s start...

The Girl-on-Girl Alliance had reached the off-pink castle—they’d infiltrated Black Shiro’s base.

They were approaching the throne room, where Black Shiro, and probably Sora, were—however.

“Wait—how are we losing this many units when we’ve made it this far?!”

“Common Sense: Siege warfare begins after penetrating the enemy fortress. Our enemy’s defenses are focused in the castle keep. Numeric advantage means nothing here.”

“She has no reinforcements, though, so keep flooding her castle with troops, Dora. These are the basics of warfare. ♪”

“Unlike you two, who lived during the Great War, I was born in a peaceful world!!”

The Girl-on-Girl Alliance was met with Black Shiro’s meticulously placed infantry.

Ignoring the casualties that fell to the onslaught of bubbles, the trio’s armies forced their way into the throne room.

Once inside, the Alliance was under attack yet again.

One unit’s final visual showed Shiro’s last line of defense—a group of snipers that blasted away anything that made it through the door. Behind them was the figure they were guarding.

“What are we going to do?! We can’t make it into her room!! Wait, what if we destroy the wall—?”

If they couldn’t make it through the door, they could just create their own.

“Negative: Forced entry.”

Emir-Eins, however, simply had her own infantry push through.

—The snipers’ rate of fire couldn’t keep up with the influx of units, and they had a limited amount of soul ammo remaining.

Emir-Eins continued flooding the throne room with infantry, only to see them blown away by Shiro’s snipers.

This went on until the snipers inevitably ran out of ammo.

Emir-Eins waited for the right moment to send in snipers of her own, which all fired in tandem. The paint cleared, revealing that Black Shiro’s snipers had been entirely decimated.

The assault had splattered paint everywhere, reverting more than half of the throne room into its original field of flowers.

The girls found Black Shiro in one corner of the room. She was slumped over, no more soldiers at her disposal.

“...It took us more than forty minutes to get here with a combined army of seven hundred fifty thousand... I would expect nothing less of Lord Shiro.”

“Agreement: The level of damages sustained far surpassed this unit’s calculations. However—this is the end.”

___*Pshplat*. The sound of soul paint being fired.

It flew through the air—piercing Black Shiro in the chest.

The impact sent her flying backward, where she lay motionless on the ground...

“We—we did it!!”

We’ve saved this world’s ethics—and world peace!!

Steph cheered and turned around to share this triumphant moment with her allies, and that’s when—

No—it happened before she’d even finished cheering. She heard more shots fired.

The two shots of soul paint slammed into Steph. She collapsed, still smiling as her face hit the floor.

“_____Pardon?”

___*What happened?*

Steph had no idea what was going on, so of course she failed to realize...

...that Jibril and Emir-Eins had shot her from behind.

Getting hit by another player disqualified Steph; she had been defeated.

And thus, her flower screen—along with her entire army—disappeared into thin air.

All Steph could do from the floor was watch as Jibril and Emir-Eins dodged each other’s fire.

“___What’s this? What are you doing, you heaping pile of junk?
♥”

“Self-Evident: Exactly what Irregular Number is doing. A pointless question. Another testament to your stupidity. *Pffft*.”

They pitted their remaining units against each other and began bickering...

“...Ummm. ♪ My apologies, but could either of you explain what’s going on? If I remember our pact correctly, we were going to defeat Black Shiro, take Sora back, then start over—”

Steph finally realized—she’d been betrayed.

She was starting to get used to all the deceit when her mind caught up to the turn of events.

The only thing that still confused her was how Jibril and Emir-Eins had managed to break their pact despite having sworn on the Covenants.

“I’ll be honest, I actually quite like the way you can be a total doofus sometimes, little Dora. ♪”

“Um... What? I...”

Steph blushed at Jibril’s snide comment. Emir-Eins proceeded to explain things.

“Confirmation: We formed an alliance. We swore on the Covenants to the following terms: She who captures Sora and Shiro one hundred and eighty seconds before the game ends will be deemed the winner. Losers will surrender unconditionally. Winner dictates which two couples will form—that’s it.”

“Anything else was nothing more than a promise. ♥”

And promises are meant to be broken.

Steph didn’t need to hear Jibril say as much for her to understand.

“Our alliance ended the moment we defeated Lord Black Shiro—we are once again at war. Haven’t you learned from Master by now that timing means everything when it comes to betrayal?”

Ohhh, I see. ♪

I knew there was something strange about how unconcerned they were with me amassing all those troops. ♥

—They needed to turn on each other as soon as they defeated Black Shiro. The three ladies had all the time in the world to rescue Sora once the other two were out of the picture.

This was why Jibril and Emir-Eins went to Steph’s base and hid their troops there.

And now that they’d taken out Steph and Black Shiro, the two armies were at a standstill...

“Deep Regret: Ambush has failed. But no matter. We will regroup at our bases and resume fighting as planned. Bring it on.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea. I’m so glad we can finally cut the buddy-buddy routine and just—kill each other. ♪”

After a brief exchange of hostilities, the two turned on their heels and started heading back to their respective bases.

Now out of the game and without her flower screen, Steph was nonetheless certain: The two armies were about to engage in all-out war.

“...It always ends this way...”

“What’s wrong? We’re going back to our bases now, just like we promised.”

“Okay, but one problem: I’m the only one whose promise was broken!!”

“Prediction: Lady Dol would not have lasted this long anyway. This unit believes it’s fair to say that this is within the realm of our promise.”

“It most certainly is not!! Just because the results are the same doesn’t mean it’s okay!!”

Steph heaved a sigh as she watched Jibril and Emir-Eins leave.

“I guess it’s fine... At least I was able to prevent one man from shacking up in a love hotel with an underage girl. That was my original goal...after all...”

I also won’t have to struggle with deciding whose hand to hold.

Steph convinced herself that this was the best possible outcome. However:

“There is one thing bothering me, though...,” she said absentmindedly. “Shiro was wearing Sora’s shirt... Was that a coincidence?”

Jibril and Emir-Eins stopped in their tracks and looked back at Steph.

“_____What did you just say, Dora?”

“Hm? Well, I mean...when a girl wears a boy’s shirt, it tends to suggest that a certain something occurred... So I just wondered if we might have been a bit too late... What? Am I overthinking things?!”

Jibril and Emir-Eins instantly replayed the scenario in their minds.

Yes—Black Shiro was wearing a shirt.

They remembered—the words written on it before they fired the killing blow.

____All too late, they realized it read I ♥ PPL.

“No—it can’t be—?!”

“Confirmation: ...Shock: _____Impossible.”

The two ladies scrambled to their screens, only to fall speechless at what they saw.

Every single unit they’d sent into Black Shiro’s base had been *obliterated*.

____Jibril and Emir-Eins both determined that the moment their paint hit Black Shiro would signal the start of their battle for Sora’s hand.

It goes without saying that their units in Black Shiro's castle were the first to receive their new orders.

And if Black Shiro was in the throne room, then Sora also had to be nearby.

The two ladies needed to capture both Sora and Shiro—they obviously couldn't let their opponent get a head start.

However—Jibril's and Emir-Eins's armies had been completely decimated. This was virtually impossible!

At least one of their armies should've had some units left, even if only a few. There was no way both sides would lose every last soldier during the final battle!

In other words: Somebody had taken out their remaining units.

—And who was that somebody? It was obvious.

This person had ambushed the leftover forces in secret as Jibril and Emir-Eins duked it out in the throne room; they'd likely waited for this very moment when the two factions realized who was behind everything.

"Um, I'm starting to get tired of asking this, but what's going on?"

No longer able to access her screen, Steph didn't know what had Jibril and Emir-Eins so shocked.

Although...I probably would've asked the same question even if I still had my screen, she thought.

"...Foeniculum, was it? Allow me to confirm something, if you would." Jibril ignored Steph's question and spoke to her screen.

"Hey, hey! What's up? ♣"

"...Can Lord Black Shiro hear this conversation...?"

"I'm not tellin' her anything, and you guys can't contact each other. C'mon, you know that already."

Jibril bowed to Foeniculum. "Yes, I was aware. I was merely confirming so that I could give appropriate praise where praise is due."

She sounded strangely happy, then closed her eyes with a look of deep respect.

—What's going on?

The answer to Steph's question was clear as day.

—Black Shiro's army was still in the fight.

She must have faked getting shot. The meaning of this was similarly self-evident:

Black Shiro had predicted that the three of them would team up

against her.

She'd placed her soldiers in such a way that the Alliance would be forced to take her out of the game with sniper fire.

Once that happened, the trio would betray each other.

Black Shiro's units had lain in wait, concealing her remaining firepower...until they were dispatched at the precise moment to annihilate the trio's armies.

All this without a lick of enemy intel.

Somebody had pulled this off without knowing the terms of the Girl-on-Girl Alliance.

—Shiro? No, it wasn't her.

Steph and Jibril alike knew there was only one person capable of pulling this off. Even Emir-Eins, who was still just partially acquainted with the group, knew who this person was.

Someone behind—no, next to—Shiro.

Where *he* always was. This could only be *his* doing...

“My master is indeed wise. His brilliance quite honestly has me speechless.”

“Respect: He defeated us all without uttering a single word. He turned the tables on us in one fell swoop. Master is incredible... I'm in love.”

The two began singing Sora's praises, a cycle Steph broke with a scream.

“Whaaat?! Sora helped Black Shiro?! But if she wins, he'll never be able to get a girlfriend for the rest of his life! Wait, doesn't that mean—?!”

No... But that essentially means...

...he's...made his decision...

“That is correct, Dora. Go ahead and cry if you need to; it's all right.”

“Presentation: This unit's shoulder. Temporary access granted to Lady Dol. Shall we cry together...?”

They would've had the slimmest chance of victory had they been up against Shiro by herself, but a game against Blank was a lost cause...

Not only that—the girls had lost more than just this game.

Steph took Emir-Eins up on her offer and cried on her shoulder.



The trio had guessed right.

Back at the off-pink castle, Black Shiro's fortress...

"Mwa-ha-ha... Ha-ha-haaa, AHHH-HA-HA-HAAA!! Pitiful. Look at how tenuous their bonds are without a common cause!! So weak—so easily manipulated!!"

It wasn't Shiro who was tapping away at the screen but her brother—Sora.

He executed a stunning series of maniacal cackles as if he were a real Demon Overlord.

—Sora indeed had no knowledge of the Girl-on-Girl Alliance.

However: *I knew things would turn out like this*, he thought with a dastardly smile.

"There is but one way to build such a vast army under these circumstances: Create separate conditions to pick a winner before the game's end, and the victor chooses who holds hands with whom. This made it possible to amass tips from the girl-on-girl shippers—am I right?!"

—Sora's declaration wouldn't reach the girls.

But since he knew the viewers were listening, he let them in on his secret.

"I deduced the terms of their victory were to capture either me or Shiro—maybe even both of us."

In which case, it's simple, really: We just need to pretend that we've run out of units...when we've actually hidden them.

The players don't know how many soldiers are in their opponents' possession. Piece of cake, then.

"All we had to do was make it look like Shiro had been taken out of the game... That one move put an end to their alliance! Then, we simply waited until the Alliance members defeated each other before ambushing them. Wham, bam, thank you, ma'am!! Bwa-ha-ha-ha!!"

Sora laughed out loud once he'd finished explaining.

—Making it look like Shiro had been hit was the only real gamble he'd made.

Without any concrete proof that his method would work, he'd based his gamble on the slimmest evidence.

That evidence? Something Foeniculum had mentioned:

Our soul paint can't destroy your personal belongings.

Were this true, then Shiro's shirt would act as a paint-proof vest, which meant—

—even if paint got on his shirt, it wouldn't touch the player wearing it!!

They tested the theory beforehand with one of Shiro's soldiers—and indeed, the paint was unable to penetrate Sora's T-shirt.

Granted, they couldn't test whether that would take the player out of the game.

Not only that, but should the enemy's paint hit her anywhere other than the shirt—which was particularly likely if the final blow was made by any soldier other than a sniper—it would most definitely mark Shiro as out.

Thus, it was imperative to lure the enemy into using a sniper for the killing blow.

There still remained a chance that, despite pulling this off, the enemy would check the point of impact as well—this would spell the end for the siblings.

This gamble of his was high-risk, high-reward. Sora grinned from ear to ear.

“Here's where things get interesting!! They've already taken Steph out of the game—it's just Jibril and Emir-Eins left, the couple the viewers want to see most!! So who are they gonna support this time?!”

Steph was the only person in the Girl-on-Girl Alliance who could make the Flügel × Ex Machina couple come to fruition.

However—this was no longer the case now that Sora had sussed out the terms of said alliance.

“I bet they're gonna support Shiro—which means me!! Hope you two ladies are ready to be dominated by overwhelming skill and numbers!! MWA-HA-HA-HA-HA!!”

Thus, in a single move, the tables were turned from inescapable defeat to total victory.

Sora was acting more like a Demon Overlord than his sister—and speaking of whom...

“...H-how...?”

Shiro had followed her brother's directions with the paint-proof shirt and listened to his entire spiel.

She stared at him in astonishment before stammering a single question:

“...How...did you get out of the cage, Brother...?!”

Shiro had put Sora in a cage before the game started.

She'd even had him handcuffed and gagged.

And yet—he'd suddenly appeared behind her and started tapping away at the controls while explaining his strategy.

She questioned where Sora had learned this Houdini act—but his answer shook her to the core.

“I just walked right outta there. You never locked the cage or the handcuffs.”

.....What.....?

“The gag was really loose, too. You made sure I could *escape at any moment*, didn’t you, Shiro?”

The Demon Overlord candor now gone, he’d reverted to his usual kind smile, which made Shiro think.

——*I didn’t mean to do that.*

She wasn’t sure if she’d forgotten to lock him in or if Sora was telling the truth.

Whatever the case—Shiro grew even more desperate.

“...Then...why didn’t you push me away...?!”

“I’d never push you away,” replied a bewildered Sora, leaving his sister speechless.

——*What’s he talking about?*

I don’t get it. What does he mean—?!

“...B-but after all I put you through, after everything I said to you...don’t you find me repulsive?! I—I don’t even know...what I want, or what I’m doing anymore!! You should hate me for all this!! Why aren’t you pushing me away?!”

Why are you being so nice to me...?!

Why are you helping me?! If I win...

“...You’ll never be able to get a girlfriend for the rest of your life!! Why are you on my side?!” Shiro shouted, her voice quavering in confusion.

“Hm, I’d rather you ask one question at a time, but first of all—did you do anything that terrible to me?”

Sora tilted his head, puzzled. For a second, Shiro felt as if she saw the light escape his dark eyes, and she froze.

——*H-huh?*

“At least I don’t feel like you said anything particularly cruel to me. I am a loser—it’s a fact—and it was wrong of me to try getting a girlfriend. I mean, think about it. ‘Never get a girlfriend for the rest of my life’? Let’s not kid ourselves here; I couldn’t get a girlfriend even if I wanted to. Any Covenant-binding wager that prevents me from getting one is no skin off my nose. So, like, the way I see it is: no harm, no foul.”

——*Wait. Did I actually break him...?*

Shiro began panicking internally just a little—when Sora answered her other question with a warm, gentle smile:

“I’m always on your side, Shiro.”

“_____”

Shiro listened blankly...and at last, she understood everything.

It finally clicked—something that she should’ve known all along...

“No matter what you want to do or try, I’ll always be there for you. You wanna go to hell? I’ll gladly join you. Wanna destroy the world? Just tell me when and where.”

—In this world where the Ten Covenants exist...

...how and why did she kidnap, imprison, and even whip her brother?

Sora had already answered this question back when Shiro was crying in the bath.

Doesn’t matter if you want to yell at or hit me. I’ll do whatever it takes to make you feel better.

He accepted her for who she was.

He would stick with her through thick and thin.

Not only that:

“If you really do hate me—if you really can’t forgive me—then that’s fine. If you want me to go away because you think I’m a loser, if you never want to see me again—I’ll do just that. I dunno how I’ll manage afterward...but... Yeah...”

—*I’ll accept your feelings even if you can’t stand me. But...*

“Until then—I’m *never* gonna abandon you, and I’ll never leave you crying all by yourself.”

This was the wish Shiro made when she cried to herself.

Her brother was there to answer that very wish—

“So, uh, your loser brother, who may or may not have been sexually attracted to you, this super-gross life-form mentally and physically at the bottom of the loser food chain in any dimension, will always be there for you, until the day you want me to leave.”

Shiro told herself:

That day will never come.

Not in a million years, so—

Sora joked the way he always did—but his next words were genuine.

Just like always, the weight of his words was likely lost on Sora himself as he said them.

And those words were—

“You and me, Shiro. We’ll always be together.”
—without question, an eternal vow...

.....,

They didn’t make her heart flutter.

She didn’t blush, or tremble, or even tear up.

Her maelstrom of tumultuous emotions abated until it almost felt like they’d been one big lie.

Shiro gazed at her brother’s face—into his eyes—as she listened to him speak those words...

...Ahhh... This... *This is what I wanted...*

Yes... These words she’d heard so many times.

Ones that didn’t make her anxious or giddy—they felt just like the sunrise at dawn.

They were right in front of her face, so natural and familiar by now—so she just listened, as relaxed as could be.

Suddenly Shiro had another fleeting thought.

She recalled the first time she’d heard him say these words.

It was the day they’d first met. At least that’s how she remembered things—but she knew that was wrong.

She knew she’d felt just as she did in this moment.

She must have felt a spark one time he’d said those words—but when was that?

Shiro had no idea, no matter how many times she ran through her memory banks—so she smiled with relief.

—Ah... *I knew it.*

I was right. Guess I was just a bit confused.

This love of mine—started long before I was born.

I was scared he wouldn’t like me, that he’d abandon me, that he’d get sick of me. I was so anxious, so scared...

Lovers are so fleeting. It’s a relationship so ridiculously fragile, one that can end at any moment.

Me and Brother...

We must’ve finished all that business long before we were born...

—————.....



With ninety seconds left on the clock, the game was quickly approaching its end—

“Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha!! At long last—it’s time for the viewers’ paid

requests! Here's mine: I order Jibril and Emir-Eins to hold hands!! Yo, Foeniculum!! Hurry up and give them my demands— Uh, wait. I'm technically not a player in this game, so I guess Shiro's gotta do the asking. Whaddaya say, Shiro?!"

Just as Sora had predicted, all the soldiers came to a sudden halt when the two remaining players surrendered to the winner.

He ordered the pair to become a forced couple for a day, and Shiro heeded his demands with a brief nod before taking out her phone.

Returned to her senses, she glanced at the gate behind the throne—and then at the numbers displayed on her smartphone.

—The group had far surpassed five billion points.

Shiro realized the true intent behind Foeniculum's game.

—*I see. So one of us can leave if we buy a key...*

We all thought that buying this key would be the hardest part—but we were dead wrong.

The real problem was the other four members—they needed to pair up in order to pass through the gate.

Foeniculum realized the group needed to make enough money to buy a key and win the game.

So who would end up as couples, and who would use the key?

If they formed two couples, that meant either Shiro or Sora would have to be paired with someone else.

No way the group would be able to decide that peacefully—so this was Foeniculum's solution to get them all out of the Spratul in one piece...

Furthermore—Shiro had unwittingly failed to lock her brother's cage and handcuffs.

What was her subconscious intention behind placing the throne room in front of the gate?

—*That's obvious*, Shiro thought with a small grin, thoroughly convinced.

...She currently had both the smartphone and the tablet in her possession.

I'm the only one who could possibly know that we've achieved our goal of five billion points.

I need to take advantage of this situation—this is an opportunity.

Shiro was back to her normal self. Employing her usual thought process, she devised a plan.

True... I managed to remember that Brother and I are more than lovers.

But still—am I fine with keeping things the way they are?

—Might as well take our relationship a bit further.

Though Shiro was back to her regular self, she was still dressed as Black Shiro.

“Hee-hee... Brother, I’m so glad you finally learned your place. You looser. ♥”

Shiro peeked at the screen from behind Sora.

“Now you’ll *never* be able to get a girlfriend. ♥ You’ll be with your little sister *forever*. ♥”

“Yup. Pretty awesome. You know what’d be even more awesome, though? If you’d turn back into your regular self,” he responded with a grimace.

Meanwhile, Shiro’s brain groaned as it operated at full capacity.

...How did I do it earlier?

How did I speak so smoothly?

Losing her mind had caused her to cease all thought and speak eloquently—so she was simply emulating those conditions.

She kicked her brain into overdrive to do the impossible. Her head felt ready to split open.

However—she didn’t care if it did. She was going to take this relationship one step further!

Her brain was going a mile a minute to re-create her Black Shiro persona.

“Okay, repeat after me: ♥ ‘I’m a perverted loser who’s been sexually attracted to his little sister.’ ♥”

“Right. I’m a perverted loser who can’t deny that he may have been sexually attracted to his little sister.”

“‘I’m a pathetic loser whose little sister is allowing him to stay by her side.’ ♥”

“I’m an extremely lucky loser whose benevolent little sister was willing to look past how pathetic I am and let me stay by her side.”

“I take responsibility for confusing my little sister and pledge to make a pass at her.’ ♥”

“I take responsibility for confusing my little sister and pledge to make a— **You want me to do *what?*!**”

Shiro silently approached Sora. He’d reacted just as she predicted.

“Brother...I told you to repeat after me. ♥”

With the same grin painted across her face, she crept closer—one step at a time.

Overwhelmed, Sora tried to retort while he backed away from

Shiro.

"I'm not gonna do anything like that to you!! Talk about unforgivable!!"

He kept backing up until he hit the wall—which was actually the gate.

Shiro made her eyes tear up—it was time to finish him.

"But Brother...you said you'd do anything I want you to... Were you lying...?"

"I know I need to take responsibility for how much confusion I caused you due to how big of a loser I am!! I promise that, if you still want me to do something like that once you're back to normal, I'll consider maybe potentially doing something somewhere down the line!!"

Sora saluted as he rattled off his knee-jerk response.

...Mm. I can live with that. ♥

Shiro flashed a satisfied smile, and then—

"Tiiiiime's up!! The game's finished!! Our forced couple for the next day is—Jibril and Emir-Eins!! Yeehaw!!!!"

—an announcement from her screen confirmed that the game was over.

Her brother would remain a bachelor for the rest of his life.

She also confirmed that the two of them could *hold hands without becoming a forced couple*.

Shiro then tossed her phone aside before bodily throwing herself at Sora.

"Whoa, what're you doing?! I was being sincere, you know _____?!"

She grabbed his hand and pushed him through the gate behind him.

Sora reflexively opened his mouth to speak...

...but she kept him quiet by closing it with her own.

The two were enveloped in light as they passed through the gate. Shiro slowly removed her lips from Sora's and, with flushed cheeks, whispered in his ear:

"You promised...okay? ♥"





Foeniculum and her viewers witnessed everything...

Indeed...Shiro had no intention of leaving the Space That Only Couples Can Leave with anyone but her own brother.

The viewers watched as Shiro and Sora—the pair who realized they were more than a couple—left the Spratul first.

They were followed by Jibril and Emir-Eins, locked hand in hand as they bickered all the way through the gate.

A teary-eyed Steph eventually showed up alone, a dreary smile on her face—although not having to pick a partner came as a huge relief when she found Shiro's smartphone with the key ready for purchase.

That was the end of the stream.

“All righty then...I'm pretty sure y'all know what that means—”

The *ka-chings* kept on coming; Foeniculum turned to the camera and addressed her viewers.

“This concludes the Space That Only Couples Can Leave private stream, brought to you by yours truly, only on Channel Foeniculum.”

—The tips were still pouring in, but the program had long since reached five billion points...

The viewers knew exactly what this meant; they'd been told what the goal was beforehand.

It was part of the terms of service required for subscribing to Foeniculum's private channel.

“—Okay, lemme check with y'all one more time...”

Therefore, what Foeniculum said next wasn't an explanation, but a confirmation—a speech.

“Most Fairies serve the Elves just to get a taste of their love lives. I've always been against this personally. And that's because I think love between members of the same race is *boring as heck!!*”

There are sixteen races in this world.

So why does everyone stick to their own kind? Why be satisfied with such basic love?

“You folks called me crazy when I said this. Y'all wrote me off as nuts...”

Yep. Everyone used to laugh at Foeniculum, the bottom-of-the-barrel streamer.

“Now I need to ask... You think *I* was the crazy one?!”

That same Foeniculum was speaking to her over 1,800,000 subscribers—*every single Fairy who wasn't an Elven Gard slave.*

“Whoever wants to see the next episode of this love story—follow me!!”

That's right: This wasn't the end.

It was the just the *prologue*!!

“Us Fairies are gonna work together with those kids to create a new world!!”

The world they were trying to make would be full of the love Foeniculum had showed her viewers over the past ten days.

“Just imagine!! Immanities in love with Flügel or Ex Machinas. Hell, even Flügel and Ex Machinas are on the table. An Immanity and an Elf, maybe even an Old Deus and a Werebeast—plus, the Immanity-on-Immanity love we saw was pretty incredible, too. All this passion I'm talkin' about—our new world is gonna be chock-full of the stuff!!”

That's right... She wasn't talking about a dream of hers or her hopes for the future. The love she spoke of already existed—she'd shown it to her viewers.

“If any of you folks ain't interested, now's your chance to familiarize yourself with the UNSUBSCRIBE button. But hear me out!!”

If you aren't going to take the step that needs to be made...!!

“We're all Fairies here, children of the god of love, Alram!! We'll go so far as to sell ourselves into slavery to get our fix of other people's romantic endeavors!! *It's a Fairy's duty to fill the world with love*—so if any of you pathetic Fairies ain't about that life, you ain't welcome!!!!”

Within seconds—her screen was buried in a wall of comments, all saying...

“““YES, YES, YES!!!”””

Foeniculum grinned as her viewers flooded the chat.

Excellent. Now then...

She raised both arms and proclaimed to her people:

“As your agent plenipotentiary—I, Foeniculum, think it's high time for a *rebellion*.”

The next instant, an immense amount of soul power began spiraling around the Fairy representative's wrist.

It was none other than the five billion souls she'd gathered from her Fairy viewers, as planned.

More raw power than what had been used to engulf Elkia in a

Spratul—

“We’re gonna see the love of a lifetime unfold—something that’ll change the world!! No more will we live in those shitty dark ages where we scraped by on Elf drama!! That ends today!!”

She was going to use the indescribable soul power at her disposal to steal Elkia back.

Those souls converged and transformed before Foeniculum’s voice rang out once more:

“We’re gonna take on Elven Gard together with Sora and the gang!! We’ll hit the Elves wiiiiith_____a Sprite Shade!!!!”

The spatial phase boundary rumbled from this declaration of war.....



■■■

The five participants had escaped the Space That Only Couples Can Leave—the Spratul that Foeniculum had created.

Being ejected onto an uninhabited island off the coast of the Eastern Union left them baffled at first.

But they wouldn't have to suffer for too long. They'd just heard Foeniculum's voice from somewhere nearby...

The moment she said the phrase *Sprite Shade*, all their suspicions and confusion flew out the window.

The answer to everything was in their lost memories—all of which had been restored.

Ah yes—the entirety of their memories.

Memories so meticulously erased to keep the five of them from realizing the truth.

The memories involved a sort of *poison* that Sora and Shiro had created.

And just as suspected, that included the details of how they had ended up in this game.

Namely—

—their memories regarding Blank's first major loss...

Their poison had been used against them—and they lost.

There was no room for excuses. This was a clear-cut defeat. They'd been utterly, categorically beaten.

—By Elven Gard.

More specifically, by Elven Gard's president.

The Elf agent plenipotentiary—that man—had defeated them...



CHAPTER 4 ORIENTATION SHIFT

TURNING WORLD

The capital of the Republican Dukedom of Elkia, previously the Kingdom of Elkia.

A week had passed since the group finished their game with Foeniculum.

It was Sora and Shiro's first time being back at the castle since they were kicked out of the throne room a month and a half ago.

But Sora—arms crossed, eyes closed, face the epitome of serious—wasn't in the throne room...

“...Okay, one last time. Are you sure you can do this, Emir-Eins?”

He heard someone answer from beside him, though he couldn't see them.

“Affirmation: This unit will compile all captured visual and drone footage. Edited footage will be sent to Master's smartphone in a replayable format. Easy-peasy, hee-hee.”

“...Ex Machina...are mad, useful...”

“Sora is the only one who would use an Ex Machina for something like this...”

“Request: Reward upon accomplishment of mission. Will Master compliment this unit?”

Shiro and Steph listened incredulously to the exchange while Sora nodded magnanimously.

You bet I will! I'll sing your praises on high!!

There's an incredible spectacle about to take place in Elkia Royal Castle's Great Bath. I won't be able to see paradise in the flesh as I sit here still clothed and eyes shut. But if you provide me with the means to see it, I'll praise you as much as you want!!

—Slam!!

“Sora! Shiro! Long time no see, please!! Let's play a damn game, please!!”

“Hey, Izuna! Yeah, it's been ages since I last saw you. That was

around when Holou showed up, so...maybe two months?”

“...’Sup... Yeah, let’s play. If we win...we’re gonna fluff, your fur... ♪”

“Come now, Izuna...! We’re in the presence of the Holy Shrine Maiden; let’s not forget our manners—”

“Hee-hee, ’tis quite all right... A little thing like her ought to be a touch rowdy. So cute.”

The first person to show up at the bath—by tackling Sora and Shiro into a big hug—was Izuna Hatsuse, a small Werebeast girl with fennec fox-like ears and a matching tail.

She was followed by the Shrine Maiden, a golden fox-like Werebeast and the leader of the Eastern Union, and then Izuna’s grandfather Ino Hatsuse.

—Emir-Eins, meanwhile, made sure to edit out any indelicate objects (read: Ino) that appeared within the frame.

That included Izuna, although in her case it was more of an ethics issue; some conveniently placed steam would keep things in check.

In any event—after the beautiful pair of Werebeast ladies made it onto the scene—

“Thou! Thou, thou, thou! Sora! Thou promised to answer all of Holou’s questions!! Where hast thou been the past 1,268 hours since thou left me with my host?! Holou now hath 43,237 more questions!!”

“My bad, my bad. I’ll get back to answering your questions starting today. Same goes for your pop idol career. Just let my little slipup slide this time, ’kay? ♪”

“What was that?! Thou intendeth to make Holou sing and dance again?!”

Holou showed up as if she’d been painted into existence and rushed at the siblings, foaming at the mouth. An inkpot about the same size as she was floating at the beautiful young goddess’s side.

She was the soon-to-be agent plenipotentiary of Old Deus, not to mention the next big thing on the idol scene.

“Nyaaa, Jibsy, you have no idea how lonely your big sister was without you... Everyone back at the Council just ignores me!! All I did was try mobilizing Avant Heim to wipe Elven Gard off the face of the planet when I heard you were missing!! Don’cha think they’re overreacting?!”

“Yes... I’m relieved to hear that my other elders have some sense.

♥ In fact, don’t you think now would be the perfect opportunity to retire as our agent plenipotentiary and spend the rest of your life in

hermitage? ♪”

It was Azril who appeared next, clinging to Jibril and wailing as they arrived via shifting.

Jade hair, a single horn protruding from the top of her head, and motionless wings at her waist—this being was the first ever Flügel.

She was also the Flügel Alipotentary and the chair of Avant Heim’s government.

—Although evidently, she might not hold that position for much longer...

“Daaaaaarling! ♥ You called? That means you’ll step all over me, right?! Step on my face, kick me, ignore me—then use me as a doormat for the castle gate?!”

“Your Majestyyy!! I shouldn’t have to constantly remind you that you need water to liiive!! You’ll dry out if they use you as a doormaat!!”

“It’s fiine. ☆ You’re such a worrywart, Plum. ♥ We’ll just need to splash her every now and then. You know, just enough to keep her alive. ♪ Our simpleminded queen actually came up with a good idea for once. She gets stepped all over, and I get to watch—it’ll be quite the spectacle. ☆”

Next came Laila leaping into the bath with her masochistic tendencies cranked up to eleven. Despite what went on in that head of hers, this shimmering, scaly-tailed maiden was in fact the queen of the Siren.

She was followed by two others: Plum, the last surviving Dhampir male who was clad in black and on the verge of tears, and Amila, the de facto Oceand representative and a somewhat-more-sane-than-most Siren.

“And hold on! I heard everyone showed up via Flügel magiic! So why did we have to come here on our ownnn?! I’ll h-have you know I had to stuff these two into barrels and carry them all the way from Oceand under the blazing suuun!!” Plum pleaded. His life was hanging by a thread after he’d used up nearly all his magic.

Sora ignored his cries, though. Needless to say, he’d forced Plum to make the trek purely out of spite.

—And then:

“Wow-wee! Look at all these faces!! So fill me in, people!! Who’s got the hots for who?! Anyone strike your fancy?! Doesn’t matter either way, ’cause we Fairies will give ya the push you need to make some love happen!! So let’s hear it!! Geh-heh-heh!!”

The last member to show up was their newest addition.

It was Foeniculum, who apparently had become the Fairy agent

plenipotentiary after recent events.

The Werebeast agent plenipotentiary—the Shrine Maiden.

The Flügel agent plenipotentiary—Azril.

The Siren agent plenipotentiary—Laila Lorelei.

The Dhampir agent plenipotentiary—Plum Stoker.

The Ex Machina agent plenipotentiary—Einzig, present remotely through his link with Emir-Eins.

Also present: the future Old Deus agent plenipotentiary—Holou.

And finally, representing Fairy, most of whom remained enslaved to the Elves—Foeniculum.

In other words, each of the major figures representing the Commonwealth of Elkia's nations were present.

In even more words, there were animal-eared girls, angels, mermaids (although unfortunately, no real vampiresses), a mecha-girl, a goddess, and a literal Fairy!

Female representatives from pretty much every race—women so beautiful, it's quite literally beyond human comprehension—and they're all here!! Assembled in the Elkia Royal Castle's Great Bath!!

Ah, the Great Bath—what a wonderful phrase!!

It should go without saying that the women were present *in the nude*—one of the stipulations of their invitation to the Great Bath.

The men, however, were there under the stipulation that they would be clothed and keep their eyes closed. As unfortunate as it was, Sora was unable to see the beautiful scene.

For now, at least...! I can't see it...yet!!

Be that as it may, if there is a heaven on Disboard, it is most certainly in this very bath!!

Heaven itself has manifested within our castle's Great Bath and is playing out around me as I sit here!!

I may not be able to savor the scene in this moment—however!! Thanks to Emir-Eins, I'll have everything on video to watch as much as I'd like!! With the men edited out and the children obscured with steam, the footage will be perfectly legal!!

Sora was convinced: *Ah, yes—surely, my entire life has been leading up to this very day...*

Sora trembled with emotion, tears escaping his closed eyes and running down his cheeks—and then he was hit with a new thought.

“...Hey, Shiro? Is Foeniculum...wearing any clothes?”

“...She...is...”

Shiro timidly answered Sora's question—one that was on

everybody's minds:

—Is Foeniculum a guy or a girl?

“Hmm? Pretty sure your invitation said ‘women come naked, men come clothed and with their eyes shut,’ right? I didn’t know what to do since I’m not a guy or a girl, so I just decided to come clothed. Should I strip down?”

“Report: Judging by past statements made by the Fairy unit known as Foeniculum, this unit estimates Fairies have no gender.”

Makes sense—so Foeniculum isn't a guy or a girl.

What's there to get hung up about, then?

Sounds like the decision is mine to make, and now I gotta know for sure—so strip she must!!

“Then, what’re you waiting for?! Hurry up and take off those clothes and get in frame for the—”

—Wait.

“Hold on... Didn’t you say something about having *both*—?”

“Yep. I got a stamen and a pistil. Wanna see?”

A troubled Sora folded his arms and reconsidered Foeniculum’s offer to strip—an offer she’d made at the drop of a hat.

—So...*what does she have...*?

Foeniculum did have a modest bust, suggesting a more feminine physique. She appeared female based on looks alone, unlike the more androgenous Plum.

If she literally has a stamen and pistil...then it’s safe to assume she’s just like the flower in her hair.

...What if Fairies aren’t genderless, but...bi-gender?

What if...they have *both*...?

Fairies don’t experience love and romance for themselves... What if they’re not embarrassed by showing their own equipment?

Whichever parts Foeniculum may or may not have, Emir-Eins was going to edit out anything inconvenient from Sora’s final cut.

But for the females currently in the bath, it was a different story. They would have to see the truth with their own two eyes, live and in the flesh.

This could be problematic, especially with the presence of Shiro and Izuna...

“.....Foeniculum will strip from the waist up but cover her bottom half with a towel!!”

“Hmmm? I don’t get what you’re so worked up about, but sure, if you insist.”

After significant consideration, this was the great compromise Sora came up with.

...Schrödinger's cat is best left inside its box.

An unobserved phenomenon is a paradox of quantum superposition—in this example, simultaneous female and male parts.

...Granted, there might be an *actual* pussy inside that box...

In any case, Sora opted to save this discovery for a later date.

“___Right. Now that we're all gathered here, might I start us off with a question?” came the somewhat lackadaisical voice of the Eastern Union's leader, the Shrine Maiden. “You're not serious about holding a Commonwealth meeting here in this bath, are you...?”

“You bet your tails I'm serious. What, is that up for debate or something?”

Sora was truly thrown off by the question. He cocked his head in confusion, eyes still closed.

Jibril, who was sitting by Sora's side, smiled and added, “It is Master's policy to welcome new allies into the Commonwealth with a communal bath—far more important than any of the silly Ten Covenants. ♪”

It was a necessary ceremony, though too much had been going on when the Ex Machina joined the Commonwealth.

This bath was meant to make up for lost time!!

“...Aye. Then, I have an official statement to make as the agent plenipotentiary of Werebeast and the Eastern Union. I would like to ask the Kingdom of Elkia—that is, the Immanity agent plenipotentiary—some questions.”

The Shrine Maiden's two tails hit the water with a *splooosh* as she sank into the bath.

“Depending on your answer, the Eastern Union may *drop out* of the Commonwealth of Elkia.”

.....And then there was silence.

The friendly mood instantly turned icy.

A stifling silence descended on the group, so quiet that even droplets of water could be heard echoing throughout the bath.

...No one was shocked by or opposed to the Shrine Maiden's statement.

Izuna hung her head; Ino sat wordlessly, his expression serious.

Amila and Plum grinned nervously while they waited to see where this was going.

Each individual had their own personal reactions, but their silence wasn't out of surprise or opposition—it was out of agreement.

“___Recent events have split the world into two factions: the Commonwealth of Elkia and Elven Gard.”

Sora, Shiro, and even Steph knew this was coming. They waited

for the Shrine Maiden to continue.

“As the leader of one such Commonwealth nation—this Commonwealth I’ve entrusted the fate of all Werebeastkind to—I say: Our membership is dependent on your victory. We lack the capacity to remain allied if you’re going to lose... My apologies.”

Sora and Shiro sat quietly, not offering a verbal response.

She was right—the siblings had lost. It was an all-out, full-on defeat.

They’d lost to Elven Gard—to the man who represented the Elves...

They knew now what had happened before they got wrapped up in Foeniculum’s game.

The group had their memories back—their *real* memories_____.



—Just before Foeniculum’s game started:

Sora and the others were watching Elkia’s parliament through a hole Jibril had created in space.

What they saw was:

“I have been secretly communicating with Demonia. I shall now reveal everything I know step-by-step.”

“I have been secretly communicating with Elf. I shall now reveal everything I know step-by-step.”

The members came forward with the exact same statement, proclaiming their connections with Fairy, Lunamana, Dhampir, and Dragonia as well...

Sora and Shiro’s poison had forced a confession out of them all.

A heated espionage battle was secretly underway within Elkia between spies for each country and race under the guise of the Commercial Confederation—exposing their intel all at once.

—If the confessions continued, each race would end up leaking critical national intel. Such intel could be used against them in games—information that, at worst, might lead to the decimation of their entire race.

To stop the confessions, the races needed an *antidote*—a word in Japanese that only Sora and Shiro knew.

The price for Sora and Shiro’s medicine? *Your whole damn country.* No one in their right mind was willing to pay that price.

But if their race was going to survive, they would have to bargain with the siblings via games.

And thus, Sora and Shiro were going to absorb several races into the Commonwealth in one fell swoop—however:

...A Sprite Tune...

Two days later: A voice shook the world around them, and the next instant, all of Elkia disappeared; the country was wiped off the map...

_____.....

“_____Hey... What the heck happened?”

Jibril had shifted the group to what should have been Elkia.

“...Where...is this...?”

“We are in Elkia Royal Castle’s Great Conference Chamber—at least, that is what these coordinates indicate...”

“Th-that can’t be!! Where is the castle...?!”

The five of them stood there in shock. A field of flowers stretched out as far as the eye could see.

There was nothing left.

No castle, no town, no people... Everything was gone—and replaced with flowers they’d never seen before. A breeze blew a storm of petals through the air like snowfall.

“Report: Analyzing recent audio data—explanation possible based on records available from the Great War.”

Emir-Eins began calmly reporting her findings to the speechless group.

“Prediction: A Sprite Tune—a phenomenon wherein Fairies replace position space with a spatial phase boundary.”

They’d heard the name before during their battle with Holou—specifically, during the Great War RTS against Jibril.

But even with Emir-Eins’s explanation, the siblings were uncomprehending.

“...So what you’re saying is...?”

Sora prodded her for further explanation, to which Jibril obliged.

“...I believe it means the Fairies have sealed the entirety of Elkia away in a separate space.”

Yeah...I figured..., Sora bemoaned to himself.

_____Elkia was gone.

It didn’t matter who was behind it or how they did it. That wasn’t the core problem here_____

“_____How the hell does that make any sense?! You can’t just

erase a country!! What about the friggin' Covenants?!"

They forcibly removed an entire country from this plane of existence, sealing it away.

That's literal abduction and confinement—of a whole country and its people!!

Even if they didn't directly harm anyone in the process, there's no goddamn way this was in line with the Covenants!!

Sora was at a loss for words, but Emir-Eins simply nodded and continued.

“Affirmative: No confirmed incidence of a Sprite Tune following the establishment of the Ten Covenants in the postwar era. Literally unprecedented.”

Therefore, only one lone factor determined if it was possible to execute such a technique in accordance with the Covenants:

“____Someone must've consented to this... And at the very least, someone who was in a position to wager their country...”

Not just *someone*, but an entity with that much decision-making power—namely, the Elkian parliament.

“Addendum: Number of Fairies required to create a Spratul of this scale determined to be greater than four hundred thousand. Therefore—”

A country that had control of over four hundred thousand Fairies was behind this—Elven Gard.

They'd used Sora and Shiro's poison against the pair to set a trap...

_____.

The group stood rooted to the spot as the sun passed over their heads.

Even Steph was tuckered out after raising hell over what they ought to do first.

Jibril and Emir-Eins remained speechless while Sora and Shiro racked their brains over what options they had.

No amount of racking, however, brought them to any one conclusion other than the obvious:

They were in checkmate...

Elkia was sealed away in some kind of spatial phase boundary...

So far, the Ten Covenants had proved unyielding against the Flügel and Ex Machina—even an Old Deus. And yet it had been bypassed by the Fairies—and by the Elves who controlled them.

____There was no way to fly under the spies' radar and therefore no way to stop the confessions.

All the intel the spies confessed would be Elven Gard's alone.

What would this mean?

Sora and Shiro knew that intel as well; they'd collected it via coded banknotes.

Therefore, they were certain—at the very least, Demonica and Lunamaria would be forced to play an unwinnable game against Elven Gard.

And unlike with Sora and Shiro, the wager wouldn't be to create an alliance.

They'd be playing by Elven Gard's terms. Worst-case scenario: The two races would end up enslaved by the Elves.

There was no way to stop this fate.

Not at present, when the siblings weren't the Immanity agent plenipotentiary let alone their monarch—especially with Elkia being held hostage.

Neither Sora nor Shiro could think of a single way to potentially turn the tables.

This meant one thing:

“...We... Blank...*lost*...”

It was as plain as the words on Sora's lips—they'd lost. To make matters worse, now that their schemes had been upended and successfully used against them, two whole races were on the brink of demise.

This was their grave mistake—Sora and Shiro had worked so hard to unite the Ixseeds without shedding a single drop of blood all so that they could challenge Tet...only for their entire premise to be uprooted and the game rendered unplayable.

The siblings had been utterly defeated—no ifs, ands, or buts about it...

And all this had been done without meeting Sora and Shiro face-to-face, without ever playing a single game against them.

The fact of the matter was: Someone out there pulled this off unbeknownst to the pair, without exchanging a word with them.

Standing in silence, awash with unfathomable despair...Sora and Shiro almost felt like they heard a voice tell them:

“Good effort, but checkmate.”

.....

.....

....._____They stayed like this for who knows how long, until they realized the sky had grown dark.

Sora and Shiro chided themselves for being shocked to the point that they didn't notice the sun had already set.

That's when it happened.

"What...on earth...?! No—don't tell me_____?!"

They heard Jibril cry out in awe and lifted their heads, curious.

Sora and Shiro followed her gaze, squinting at the sky...until several moments later—they finally realized *why* it had grown dark.

The sun hadn't set; it was merely blocked out by a pair of gargantuan wings.

____Gargantuan? Massive? Friggin' huge?

There wasn't really an apt word for the sheer scale of the wings above; their size was beyond comprehension.

It actually took the siblings a few full seconds to even process what they were looking at—

—a dragon.

A mighty, enormous, immense white dragon.

There was no mistaking it... Sora and Shiro thought back to when they'd first been transported to this world.

This was the same white dragon Sora saw in the distance from atop a cliff as he took in their new surroundings.

And then—

"Analysis: _____. Speechless: _____. The last remaining Ruler of Dragonia... Reginelef the Enlightened—?!"

"Impossible!! The final Ruler of Dragonia has never made an appearance, even after the end of the Great War!! Why now?!"

—Emir-Eins questioned the result of her analysis, while Jibril was unable to believe her eyes.

____The dragon began to descend.

With a flap of its mighty wings, the pure-white creature loomed closer as if it were a mountain falling from the sky.

It was a sight equivalent to the heavens crashing to the earth, a cataclysm of biblical proportions...and yet Sora, Shiro, and Steph felt no fear.

The dragon soundlessly lowered its perspective-skewing frame before slowly landing in the flowery field that, until yesterday, had been Elkia.

All the while, it gracefully crouched low to the ground without disturbing a single flower petal.

"_____"

There was a simple reason why the three Immanities were

unafraid in the face of this extraordinary being.

—It barely felt real.

Were it not for the Dragonia's overwhelming presence, they would've assumed this was some sort of mirage.

They couldn't tell if it was near or far—or even if there was anything there to begin with.

It was like envisioning the ancient metropolis that once occupied a set of ruins.

—Or picturing a new, enormous building from its blueprint.

There was nothing there, but at the same time there was. They could feel it.

Past, present, or future, this dragon is—or was?—undoubtedly there.

Sora knew; he was *forced* to know with his mere human vessel.

...Just looking at the dragon was enough to destroy his sense of time and space.

The emotion produced by looking up at this being—was most certainly not fear.

It was like staring at a mountain range that had formed after millions of years—or at a galaxy billions of light-years away.

The most natural emotion one felt when a person beheld something beyond any and all mortal understanding—this was pure awe.

The dragon then dropped its gaze toward the group.

The very moment they met its gaze, the five of them were struck with a flash of comprehension, like a lightning bolt.

“TAKETH BACK THY COUNTRY.”

An arrogant command—one that was neither spoken aloud nor communicated via telepathy. It had no sound or vibration.

The words were simply given to them through their eyes meeting. That was it.

A forced comprehension sent directly into their minds, an awareness carved into them.

“MAKE HASTE. I HAVE PROVIDED THEE WITH THE MEANS TO DO SO.”

—This was the Dragonian tongue.

Simply perceiving their will was enough to bring a person to their knees and submit.

If not for the Ten Covenants, all of creation would surely obey every word, however—

“Oh-ho? Have the isolationists finally decided to come out now that the Great War has ended? Are the fabled Dragonia tired of playing the troglodyte mediator role, and have they come to offer my masters some assistance? How admirable of you. ♪”

—it seemed Jibril didn’t appreciate this entity giving orders to her masters, Sora and Shiro. Sneering, she brushed off the Dragonia’s unquestioning authority to make a snide remark.

In the next instant—the group felt a mountain collapse into itself.

For a Dragonia, this was hardly considered a show of anger.

It was more like the vaguest hint of frustration, the kind a parent might direct at their newborn—however.

This titanic entity surpassed comprehension to the point that it even felt surreal.

They stood no chance against the raw, cataclysmic scale of what loomed before them.

The sheer pressure from its gaze was enough to have even Jibril and Emir-Eins preparing for their death. Then several words entered the group’s minds:

“I PROVIDETH NO ASSISTANCE. THIS IS THY PUNISHMENT.”

The Dragonia’s gaze curtly—but with utmost clarity—gave them their judgment.

“REDEEM THYSELVES. THOU HAST THROWN THIS WORLD INTO DISARRAY.”

Disarray—six thousand years had passed since the end of the Great War.

Even during the War when the Ixseed fought for their lives, not a single race had been wiped from the planet.

But these siblings from another world were about to eliminate two races.

—Their failure was unmistakably theirs and theirs alone.

—Their defeat was unequivocally a crime.

The literal all-seeing eyes of the Dragonia—witness to the dawn of time and the future ahead—swept over the group.

“THOU HAST SAVED IMMANITY FROM THE BRINK OF DESTRUCTION.”

An achievement worth commendation.

“BUT THY REACH HATH EXCEEDED THY GRASP. THY POISON SHALL WREAK HAVOC UPON THE WORLD.”

The dragon was right; Elven Gard had used their poison against them.

Their failure beckoned the destruction of multiple races, maybe even the entire world.

Sora listened, unable to respond. “THEREFORE,” the dragon continued:

“I SHALL CONFISCATE THE POISON—FROM ALL WHO POSSESS IT.”

It lifted its head and spread its wings that extended beyond the horizon. The mountain range of a being then rose to its feet—and flew off.

What should’ve generated a seismic shock capable of reshaping the continent failed to create so much as a light breeze. The Dragonia drifted away in silence until it was no longer visible_____.

.....—,

...It left nothing behind, almost as if it was never there to begin with—

“...Ughhh... I’m so tired of this shit...”

—or actually...not quite.

The Dragonia did leave one thing behind: a small figure the size of a grain of rice.

So small, in fact, that no one realized she was there until they heard her speak.

It was a tiny girl with an even tinier cigar wedged between her lips and a sort of apathetic, devil-may-care attitude.

“For the love of... First a Dragonia appears outta nowhere, then it turns out they’re the quote, unquote Enlightened. *Ooh, look at me, I know everything...* Gimme a break! It’s a big friggin’ lizard, for gawd’s sake... Hmm? Oh yeah, I’m Foeniculum, and you guys probably figured this out already, but I’m here to save the day—and your asses. Whoop-de-friggin’-doooo... Ughhh.”

.....

—The group had gone from transcendent entity to...*this*...at breakneck speed. Everyone had whiplash.

“But hey, beggars can’t be choosers, eh? Our goals kinda line up, so we might as well see where this goes. ♣”

Foeniculum flashed a grin before sharing her plan.

—Which was, effectively:

Hit the subspace created by Elven Gard’s Fairies with an even more powerful subspace, releasing Elkia before the spies disclosed any intel to the Elves.

Foeniculum was going to send the group into her own Spratul—a space where romantic feelings increased as time went by.

She’d stream the group’s love affairs to get tips—or soul power—from her Fairy viewership.

Once you crunched the numbers, it turned out they’d need to accrue five billion units of soul in tips.

“But first, you gotta tell ol’ Reginleif your safe word. Once Elkia’s free, the big lizard’ll use that on the spies to keep ’em from fessin’ up their intel to the Elves. You also gotta forfeit all the dirt you’ve dug up, too.”

That wasn’t all:

“Also, I’mma make it so you don’t remember any of this—or anything pertaining to the game. I won’t be giving you any info unless you ask me first. Those are all of the stupid lizard’s terms.”

—Sora didn’t feel like he could win this game even with his memory intact.

But he and Shiro didn’t really have a choice. The playing field was defined by their loss—their mistake—and this was a way to even things out again...

Their only option was to go along with Foeniculum’s plan. However...

“...Cool if I point out three major holes in your plan and ask you a single question?”

...Sora had to double-check a few details before agreeing.

“Let’s start with the holes: Pretty sure I won’t even play the game under those conditions...”

Sora pictured how he would act with that much of his memory gone, and there was only one conclusion he could come up with.

He knew he’d realize that he and Shiro had been defeated and then assume they were being forced to play an unwinnable game.

“I’ll answer whatever questions you got about the whole situation when you ask ’em. You just gotta figure out how to get there.”

“.....’Kay, then let’s talk about the second hole.”

—*Figure it out...?*

That’s literally the most useless answer possible, but let’s set that aside for now.

“...The only way I picture a game like that ending is with me single...”

The plan involved forming two couples, with the remaining fifth person using a key to exit.

There was little to no chance that the fifth wheel was going to be anyone other than Sora.

Basically, the equivalent of evenly dividing the number one by anything other than itself.

—So it was pretty much fixed at a 0 percent chance.

In other words, even if the group managed to safely escape the subspace and get Elkia back, they would end up in two girl-on-girl couples and a single Sora—!!

I mean, it is kinda my fault this situation happened in the first place, but isn't it a bit much to sacrifice any hopes for romance just to right these wrongs...?

"Oh, you don't gotta worry about that."

Sora was ready to accept his fate, but Foeniculum shrugged off the concern with a shake of her head.

"After you're released from my Spratul, any amplified affection will return to normal. That part's only there to rake in the tips. It's a necessary evil—forcing love between two people goes against every fiber of my Fairy being. Once you're out, I'll make sure the only love you guys feel for each other is organic. ♣"

—Right, so we'll be returned to normal once it's over.

I'll be forced to be single only for the duration of the game.

I—I guess I can roll with that...

Sora wiped the tears from his eyes. "All right, now for the final and biggest hole: I can't imagine myself actually falling in love with anyone."

—This is me we're talking about. Sora, virgin, age eighteen. You want me to fall in love?

You'd have better chances of teaching a jellyfish to walk.

And to top it off, you want me to do it without my memories intact...?

Impossible. Sora looked up blankly at the sky, not expecting any sort of solution for his concern.

Foeniculum, however, took a puff of her cigar before flying right into his face.

"...It'll work. You guys'll be a hit if you just act natural."

All their friction and brooding, their ups and downs, their resignation.

Her eyes smoldered with fiery passion.

"Show the Fairies what you guys think is typical—the new world, new future you're trying to make—and they'll show up in droves with soul tips galore. I'm willin' to bet my life on it."

Sora watched as an intrepid Foeniculum offered her very life. He felt even more compelled to ask:

"That brings us to my question, then... This is the first time we've ever met you, right? So why do you have so much faith in us?"

—It's clear why Reginleif the Enlightened wants to lend us a hand.

It wants to confiscate the intel on the other races from both us and Elven Gard.

But...what about Foeniculum?

No matter which way you sliced it, she had way too much on the line here.

If the plan failed—worst-case scenario, the Elves would consider her an enemy.

And if it succeeded? Most of the Fairies would side with Sora and Shiro—and the Elves would *still* consider her an enemy. There's only risk for her no matter which way the tables turn.

What's worse—the siblings had already lost to Elven Gard once.

Why would she go as far as putting her life on the line for a bunch of losers?

Sora was unable to figure out why her eyes were aflame with so much trust in him and his sister.

“...C'mon, I feel like that should be obvious... You're really gonna make me say it out loud, huh? Ugh, how embarrassing.” Foeniculum continued with a wink and a smile. “You know the Fairies sent in their own spy along with the Elves, right?”

They did know. Sora and Shiro had the same information available to them as the Elves—

“Well, after talking to our spy, I've come to like you guys. I'm kinda a fan. ♣”

—A fan?

“Sorry, lemme tell you a little 'bout myself. I've said for years that hetero love between members of the same race is about as fun as a bag of nails. But there's one teensy problem: The world's never seen a mixed-race couple before.”

“.....”

“So like, the other races think Immanity's just a bunch of talking monkeys. You'd hafta be crazy to date a monkey, right? At least, that's what everyone else says. Mixed-race couples aren't *normal* here, so when I said it should be normal, people acted like I was off my rocker. To be honest, I'd pretty much given up on the whole idea...”

Foeniculum paused. She exhaled some cigar smoke and watched it dissipate before continuing:

“That is, until I learned about you guys... You have Werebeast, Flügel, Ex Machina—heck, you even have a Dhampir and an Old Deus just walkin' around your castle grounds, free to do as they please.”

...This information wasn't particularly valuable.

Sora and Shiro were neither trying to hide this nor promote it. It was just their *everyday life*.

“Exactly. The other races didn't really care about this intel. They figured, well, we live with our pets, too—but you guys make even less of a deal about race than you do about gender. The moment I realized this—it reinvigorated the spark in me.”

—Her cigar finally fizzled out.

She flicked away the nub before revealing a ferocious grin. “So

how 'bout we show those folks who's *really* the crazy one here?"

"...Uh-huh. Hate to break it to you, but *you're* definitely the crazy one," Sora quipped with a fierce grin of his own. "You've gotta be out of your mind to go all in on this—especially when the chips you're betting are an entire race. Anyone who doesn't see that has more than a few screws loose themselves. ♪"

"You're probably right. We'll just hafta bring the rest of the world to my own level of crazy. ♣"

—————.....

And thus, the group played Foeniculum's game. Which they...as you know...properly won.

She used an insurmountable amount of soul power provided by her viewers to engulf Elkia in a Sprite Shade, which released Elkia from the spatial phase boundary Elven Gard's Sprite Tune had sealed it in.

Sora and Shiro had to forfeit all the intel they'd gathered, allowing Reginleif to stop the spies from sharing said critical information just in the nick of time.

The Republican Dukedom of Elkia's parliament consisting of spies for each race—under the guise of the Commercial Confederation—were branded as traitors by Steph, the Commonwealth's de facto ruler, and subsequently purged.

Since this coup d'état was the work of foreign nations, she reinstated Sora and Shiro as the shared monarch, thereby managing to keep their intel from reaching Elven Gard by the skin of their teeth.

Thus, the siblings returned to the Kingdom of Elkia as its rightful sovereign.

...With that said...it should be obvious that this was hardly the time for celebration_____



The siblings were faced with an array of problems upon returning to the throne.

Among those problems was the one the Shrine Maiden was pressing Steph about in the Great Bath.

"First—what is the kingdom to do about the republic?"

"...We, ah...still need to discuss that with...the Commonwealth..."

The Shrine Maiden was right—Elkia was divided...

Immanity's only nation had become *two nations*.

The foreign spies went into hiding before Steph could give the

Commercial Confederation their final judgment.

Then, without a moment's notice, they reappeared on the far western continent of Valar in the state of Tírnóg—a territory Immanity had taken from Elven Gard that was currently under the care of the Flügel—where they started a new parliament.

—This new parliament maintained that they were the legitimate Elkia, the true home of Immanity.

They announced to the world the establishment of what they called the Republic of Elkia...

Sora and Shiro were the Kingdom of Elkia's monarch and the Immanity agent plenipotentiary—but Immanity was no longer united, which meant:

"There is significant support for the republic within the kingdom as well—how do you intend to handle that?"

"We...are working on it... I—I have already convinced Lord Dalton and Count Zaphius to stay with the kingdom. There are a number of factions standing strong with the house of Dola—"

"Aye, and just how many do you think remain loyal to the kingdom?"

"....."

The question left Steph speechless.

The answer was...*not even half*.

—Why were the Commercial Confederation spies receiving so much support?

Because people suspected that Sora and Shiro were spies for the races they'd brought into the Commonwealth.

The siblings had initially been the ones to fan flames for a coup d'état, and indeed, several races had gotten involved, but nonetheless, the Elkian nobles had grown suspicious of and disgruntled with their brother-sister monarch.

So siding with the spies and their ample support and protection from the various races made the republic appear that much more trustworthy. That's right:

The Commonwealth was too good to be true—there was some kind of catch—and this reassured them.

Of course, it wasn't difficult to see that the Commonwealth was a scam in the first place.

As unfortunate as it was, trust in the Commonwealth of Elkia was in shambles, its reputation poisoned. There was nothing good at all about supporting them...

The Shrine Maiden continued her inquisition with an expressionless face.

“And now my last question. What are you going to do about the war being waged on the Commonwealth?”

“.....Well... I...”

Just as the Shrine Maiden said, the Republic of Elkia was at war with the Commonwealth. The effort was spearheaded by Elven Gard, with support and protection from a multinational alliance. Besides Elf, this coalition included Demonica, Lunamana, Dragonia, and Gigant—as well as the Elven Gard Fairies and several Phantasma, plus a little more than half of all Immanity.

Thus, the Commonwealth was now thrown into all-out war.

The Shrine Maiden heaved a sigh.

“Very well. Then, I’m afraid I have no other choice...”

“Wait!! You don’t mean to tell me the Eastern Union is going to side with Elven Gard, do you?!”

The Shrine Maiden had gotten out of the bath and was preparing to leave when Steph stopped her.

“The anti-Commonwealth faction intends to dismantle our government and take over its nations!! Siding with them means that you agree with their enslavement and abuse of other races!!”

This all-out war—its goal was, as Steph said, to dismantle the Commonwealth and take over its countries. There was no room for peace and reconciliation.

The republic wouldn’t allow the Commonwealth to exist; they were going to crush it, and—at the very worst—obliterate it.

All Commonwealth citizens would lose their rights and become Elven Gard’s slaves.

Exiting the Commonwealth was a hard rebuke of everything that Blank stood for.

“I take it the Werebeast only care for themselves, then! I should have never put so much faith in you!!”

“Miss Stephanie! Take back those words at once!!” Ino Hatsuse lashed out at Steph for her remark. “If you truly believe this is how the Holy Shrine Maiden feels, then it is I who placed far too much trust in you.”

“...!”

“This anti-Commonwealth front—it involves five unified races and half of another three races’ population. The entire world will be engulfed in this conflict... We’ll be up against half of the world’s population, led by Elven Gard.” Ino gnashed his teeth audibly. “This new republic has already robbed the Eastern Union of the lion’s share

of its resources.”

This meant Werebeast were on their knees, and——

“To fight a force like theirs—with our Commonwealth supply chain cut off—would be suicide for the Eastern Union, especially if they hit us with an overseas embargo. Moreover——”

Ino let out a sigh before cutting into the group as he continued.

“—this predicament is...entirely the Commonwealth’s fault!!”

“_____!!!”

He was...right.

Why had the other countries sat idly by while the Commonwealth continued to expand?

It’s because all eyes were on Blank. The races outside the Commonwealth assumed the siblings had an unbeatable trump card capable of defeating certain races in games.

They just didn’t know which races this trump card worked on.

Those doubts ended up being the glue that kept the other Ixseeds on the sidelines and prevented them from conspiring against the Commonwealth.

But following recent events, the least of which were the confessions forced by the races outside the Commonwealth—namely: Elf, Fairy, Demonia, Lunamana, and Dragonia—proved that these five weren’t involved with the Commonwealth, allowing them to join forces.

This, in turn, led to the present situation: The Eastern Union’s economy had been brought to its knees.

The whole debacle was caused by Sora and Shiro’s defeat.

Unable to speak, Steph hung her head and trembled, when the Shrine Maiden said with a sigh, “...Don’t misunderstand, lass. I don’t intend to pin this all on your nation.” She cast her gaze downward. “Indeed, you two lost, and now multiple races are in peril at the hands of Elf... That is, multiple races will end up enslaved. The only reason that has yet to pass is thanks to sheer dumb luck.”

Precisely.

The siblings lost. Their hands were tied; there was no way to right their wrong.

The only reason they’d come out of this was thanks to Reginleif’s predictions and Foeniculum’s resolution.

In other words, it was pure luck. There just so happened to be other forces in motion unbeknownst to them.

And now Reginleif had sided with the Elves...

“And yet,” the Shrine Maiden said with a strained smile. “That isn’t to say I think you did the wrong thing, mind you.”

Everyone looked at her in surprise—especially Ino.

Noticing his dubious expression, she let out a low chuckle before continuing.

“The dream you two spoke of—bringing the sixteen races together without sacrificing a single soul—a full upheaval of conventions that have continued for thousands...no, millions of years. ’Tis about as nonsensical as trying to make the planet spin left instead of right. You’d have to do something quite daft to ever make that happen—that much I know perfectly well.”

They saved her dearest friend—Holou.

The siblings bet five Race Pieces for the Shrine Maiden so they could save her friend. After all they’d done for her, the Shrine Maiden had no intentions of reprimanding them, nor was it her place to do so.

But she went on:

“...Aye, but flipping the planet’s rotation will bring its own fair share of problems.”

To make the planet spin left, they’d need to create enough force to first stop it on its axis. That required a tremendous amount of power—enough to potentially destroy the planet.

The more Sora and Shiro tried to make their dream a reality, the more friction they caused.

“That’s what it takes...to change the world.”

That friction begets discord, and when that discord reaches critical mass—it destroys everything caught up in it.

And that convention known as *reality* was what caused the Shrine Maiden to give up on her dream once before.

“You two wished to change the world.” Her golden eyes grew sharper. “But there were those who did not wish for the world to change. They have you in their sights, and the world is on the verge of turning stark raving mad. At this rate, the first ones to fall will be us—the Eastern Union.”

Therefore...

She exhaled, and her tails slapped the water’s surface.

“—This is my last question, so I beg you to be honest.”

A mounting pressure could be felt emanating from the Shrine Maiden. Sora tightened his grip around his sister’s hand.

“Your dream to change the world without a single sacrifice—is that really nothing more than a pipe dream?”

The Shrine Maiden’s words, her gaze, her presence—Sora sensed everything they were telling him even without having to open his eyes.

“Should you have any way to avoid the immense loss of life—

what will most likely be Werebeast life—that is about to happen, then you'd best speak your piece now."

—The world was on a crash course for total warfare—not a direct path, but one that would nonetheless result in enormous destruction.

If there remained a way to avoid this fate, then the Shrine Maiden wanted to hear it.

"...You two made me want to dream again..."

No matter how much she resisted, how much she fought, things always ended in bloodshed.

The Shrine Maiden wanted to see a world where such conventions didn't exist—!

"Tell me I made the right decision—nay, *show me!!*"

The Shrine Maiden growled—however, Sora wasn't the one who broke the silence.

"Sorry I'm laaate!! My subterranean broke as I was making my way to the surface, and it took me three hours of digging to get up here, but I have arrived!! Shamefully covered in mud, I am!!!"

—WHAM!!

Someone had flung open the door and stormed their way into the Great Bath.

A tan-skinned girl with a pair of horns emerging from her silvery mithril-colored hair...the one Commonwealth nation yet to make an appearance—the last agent plenipotentiary.

"Be that as it may—!! Sir, Ma'am—just where did you two go off to?! I'll—I'll have you know I took two and a half laps around the planet looking for you, I did!! How cruel of you to leave little old me behind!!"

Dripping with mud, the girl rattled off her grievances before lunging at Shiro.

Shiro reflexively latched on to Sora in order to bear the brunt of this accusation, practically shrieking, "...Y-you're, filthy... Take a... shower...!"

"As for the terms for participating in this Commonwealth Summit—I would like an explanation of this nudity clause, I would!! A summit in a bathhouse?! In all honesty, that's kind of stupid, it is!! Ah, but now that you mention it, I am quite filthy, yes, so I suppose I'll take you up on that shower, I will."

Heedless of her surroundings, the girl began washing herself in front of everyone—

"—A D-Dwarf?! What is a Dwarf doing here?!"

—when Ino hollered with shock and confusion in lieu of the other

speechless bathers.

His question was what finally made the girl notice that she was the center of attention.

“Hmm? Ah, yes, I am King Sora and Queen Shiro’s big sister!! The name’s Nýi Tilvilg, that it is!!”

“...B-big...sister...?”

The Dwarf agent plenipotentiary (by proxy) left everyone—with the exception of Sora, Shiro, Jibril, Emir-Eins, and Steph—wide-eyed.

“My uncle—uh, Veig Drauvnir, chieftain of Hardenfell, said he’s ‘Busy goin’ to space,’ then mentioned something or other about big boobs—so he sent me here to fill in his spot as agent plenipotentiary of Dwarf, he did!! Although I would never ever leave your side anyway, I wouldn’t!! **Pfft!**”

The members of the summit could only watch in speechless disbelief as the Dwarf scrambled to introduce herself.

Before any of them could muster up the presence of mind to say something:

“What’s this? Oh, silly me. Did I forget to tell you guys that the second largest nation on the planet was on our side? ☆”

Sora grinned from ear to ear, laying it on thick.

“The Dwarf agent plenipotentiary Veig said Hardenfell was mine to do with what I pleased. So I was thinking I could have the Dwarves send the Commonwealth some of their excess resources, but the Eastern Union wants out, eh...? That’s too bad. ♪” He reveled in the sound of Ino’s grinding teeth as he spoke. “Hey, Til? Just how much armatite does Hardenfell dig up every year?”

“Hmm? By armatite, you mean that *rubbish* we have to dig through to mine algorithme? No one has any interest in mining non-spiritual minerals, none at all. We toss it straight into the garbage, we do.”

“Is that so? What if I told you the Eastern Union would be willing to buy whatever armatite you’re going to throw away?”

“...They *want* it? Mm, I would probably pay them to take it off our hands if they were willing, I would.”

“Really, now? ♪ Oh, but the Eastern Union isn’t going to be a part of the Commonwealth anymore, so I guess it doesn’t matter...”

...Getting on people’s nerves is a form of genius in its own right, and that’s where Sora really shines.

He flaunted this talent of his with a little wave of his hand.

“Guess we’ll be seeing you, Shrine Maiden. We’ll drop by the fluffy ear dynasty to take you over again in the coming days. ★”

“___You damn monkey bastard...”

I knew there was a reason Jibril kept quiet when the Holy Shrine Maiden was talking!

After finally filling in all the blanks, Ino couldn't help but let a curse slip out.

"Oh? ♪ What did that pathetic little doggy just say? I believe it was along the lines of 'Forgive our transgressions. Please let us stay in the Commonwealth—I shall get on my hands and knees and beg for your forgiveness,' but do correct me if I'm wrong. ♥"

With an exuberant sneer, Jibril was finally able to taunt the Werebeast.

Then—

"*Sorry, Shrine Maiden...* I can't answer whether you made the right decision."

—Sora opened his eyes and fixed his gaze on the Shrine Maiden. She stared back at him as he offered an earnest apology.

...Never mind the Shrine Maiden; Sora and Shiro had done the wrong thing themselves.

They'd made many mistakes on their journey—which finally led to a big defeat.

—Therefore, the two of them were unable to give her an honest answer...

"That said—I can answer your other questions."

"....."

The Shrine Maiden was silent. Her ears perked toward Sora, listening to both his words and his heartbeat.

"First—Shiro and I never said anything about a dream."

"....."

"All we talked about was an achievable reality—gathering all the races without a single sacrifice and challenging Tet to a game. And the fact that you thought this reality *should* be achieved—that wasn't a dream, either."

"....."

"Next—so what if half the world's against us? Like I give a shit about that."

The Shrine Maiden was listening to his pulse—she could tell he was calm.

Just like when they faced off once before. He smiled, despite knowing the weight of his words.

"We were the ones who challenged the world first. It used to be us versus ninety-nine percent of the world, and now we're at an even fifty-fifty. Incredible doesn't even begin to describe that. If you're gonna get cold feet, you oughtta do it when the scale's tipped one hundred percent in your opponent's favor."

“.....”

“And last—you said something about flipping the planet’s rotation, right? Do you have any idea how damn easy that is?”

It wouldn’t cause any friction, destroy the planet, or involve a single sacrifice. You don’t even need any real power to make it spin left.

The reason for that is—

—the planet *doesn’t actually spin to the right*.

Right and left are just arbitrary concepts someone made up.

If you look south from the northern hemisphere, the planet’s already spinning to the left.

And if you look at it from space? There isn’t an up or down in space to begin with. That’s why:

“You just gotta trick ’em. The world, I mean. Just trick everyone.”

—*Yup, just pull one over on everyone. And if they believe it, then it becomes real.*

“Make ’em think that right is left, and *boom*, there you go: The planet’s spinning left. ♪”

“_____”

Sora had no clue what the Shrine Maiden was thinking as she looked into his eyes and silently listened to his words and his heart.

He simply closed his eyes again and said:

“—Taking that into consideration, I’m gonna ask everyone here again.”

He turned his attention to the rest of the Commonwealth’s agent plenipotentiaries and inquired whether they would be willing to put the future of their races on the line:

“Which do you prefer: a world that spins right or left?”

“Whichever direction Master prefers. The Flügel shall make it spin vertically for you if you so wish.”

“H-h-hold your horses, Jibsy! *I’m* the Flügel Alipotentiary here!!”

“Oh-ho...? If you mean to tell me that you wish to keep the planet’s boring left-spinning orientation, then I daresay you should resign at once...”

“Nng— Avant Heim will continue to back the Commonwealth of Elkia! But just bear in mind that support within the Council is still at seven to two, and I still need to check if everyone would approve of— H-hey, I’m on your side!! Don’t give me that stink eye, Jibsy!!!”

—Flügel came forward first.

“Heeey!! I have no idea what everyone’s talking about, but I *do* know that my darling should be stomping all over me!!”

“...Given the current state of Her Majestyyy... Uh, put Oceand down on the Commonwealth’s side as welllll.”

“Hee-hee. ☆ Oh, Pluum? We’ve yet to hear an explanation as to why Dhampir came forward with a confessiooon. ☆ Since you guys are a bunch of traitors, you’d better say, ‘Oceand *with the exception of* Dhampir,’ ’kaaay? ♥”

“I—I simply wanted to keep tabs on the espionage warfare going on in Elkia—the fact that I didn’t prevent King Sora from stopping our spy’s confession should speak for my innoceence!!”

“We can’t have thaaat. There’s always the chance that you’re in cahoots with Elven Gard, after aaall. ☆ What, you think I’m some kind of idiot, you little twerp?”

—Siren and Dhampir...still had some minor details to work out.

“Message: From Einzig— ‘We Ex Machina will never go back on our word again.’ Over and *aus*.”

—Ex Machina’s answer was straight to the point.

“If Elf wants to go to the right, then rest assured Dwarf will go left, we will!! O-oh, but... Do we really have to get along with the Elves once this is all over? ...We do? That, I can assure you, is ★ impossible, it is.”

“...You don’t have to...get along... Just, tolerate each other...and keep your distance...”

“Not a problem, then!! As long as they stay out of our sight, that’s just dandy, it is!!”

Indeed, the two races didn’t need to understand each other. Just tolerate each other.

—That was a compromise Dwarf could make.

All eyes then turned to Foeniculum, who was caught off guard by the attention.

“Huh? Me too? I feel like our answer should be pretty obvious at this point. I wanna see love that goes beyond racial lines, people—I’ll have the planet spinnin’ left before you can say dandelion!”

With a grin, the tiny Fairy extended her middle fingers to the sky.

“I don’t have time for y’all to be mopin’ just ’cause ya lost for once. Don’t forget that I’m betting everything on you losers here. There’s only one thing ya gotta do when you lose, and that’s make a

big friggin' comeback win. Nothin' more, nothin' less. ❀"

—Fairy was clear with their answer.

And thus...

"—Hey, wait a second!! Who the heck is this little Fido here gnawing on my tail fin?! The only one who's allowed to punish me is my darling!! Do you have any idea who I am?!"

"Sora said I could, please. And he said Til can fluff my—"

Sora gave Izuna permission to nibble on the fish girl—er, the mermaid, Laila.

"Wha—? Whaaaa—?! You freakin' suck at this!! You're clumsy as shit, please!!"

"Heh-heh-heh, why hide it? You're absolutely right, you are!! I'm the clumsiest grubby mole in all the world, I am!! ...Q-Q-Queen Shirooo—y-your friend haaaates me, she does!!"

In exchange for that, he gave Til permission to pet Izuna's fur.

Jibril and Emir-Eins were in turn allowed to toy with Til.

"...I really would like your mithril hair and orichalcum eyes... Do you mind if we split them?"

"Agreement: Further processing available within fellow Commonwealth nation Hardenfell. Question: Mind if I pluck them out?"

"My hair's one thing, but I only have two eyes, I do!! You may absolutely not have them!!"

The price for this? Jibril sold—er, *gave* Azril away.

And finally, Sora was allowed to play with Azril's wings. Something he had wanted to do for a long time now.

"N-n-nyaaa... S-Sora? Wh-why are you so good at that...? Do you *really* have your eyes closed?! Mngh, not in front of Jibsy... I hafta keep my dignity as her big sis...!"

"You needn't worry about that, Elder. Lose yourself to the pleasure as much as you wish. ♥"

"Really?! I think I'll do just that, then— Nyaaaa, that's it, that's the spot... Nyaaa. ♥"

The leader of the Flügel was left moaning and twitching from Sora's touch.

Meanwhile, the lone Old Deus twiddled her thumbs and hesitatingly called out to her friend:

"H-hark, O Host... Holou hypothesizes— Holou d-doth not wish for thou to fight with Sora and his kin."

—Flügel, Siren, Dhampir, Ex Machina, Dwarf—and Werebeast.

Even the lone Old Deus wished for coexistence without conflict.

...Yes, the Shrine Maiden thought, *the world really is split in two.*

Half of it was already on the brink of realizing her dream.

A wry smile played on her lips.

“___Very well. I shall wait till the very end to see whether I made the right choice.”

The Eastern Union also chose left.

Still smiling, the Shrine Maiden submerged herself into the warm bath once more with a cup of sake in hand.

Only one person picked up on that smile, along with Sora’s and Shiro’s resulting facial expressions—and that was Steph.



The Commonwealth Summit came to an end, and its members made their way home.

Night had fallen, and Steph was walking through the nearly empty Elkia Castle.

With a basket in her right hand and a small lantern to light her way in her left, she thought:

___*Did my footsteps always echo this much in here?*

The silence was the result of most of the castle’s personnel defecting to the republic...

Steph sighed as she walked through the dark corridors in search of Sora and Shiro.

She thought about the Commonwealth Summit—about how firm Sora’s voice was and how reliable he seemed.

That was why she was looking for him. The first places she checked were Shiro’s and his bedroom and the library, but the siblings were nowhere to be found.

Her only option at this point was to wander aimlessly around the castle grounds in hopes of stumbling upon their latest hiding spot.

___Eventually, even with the cloudy night sky obscuring any moon or starlight, Steph spotted the two, thanks to the dim light from their devices.

They were on the Elkia Castle veranda.

With its panoramic view of the grand square below, this was where Sora gave his speech when he was crowned the king of Elkia.

___*Thinking back on it, this is where it all started.*

Steph found herself growing increasingly sentimental, when—

“.....Hmm? Steph?”

“...Something, wrong...?”

—Sora and Shiro called out to her after noticing she was there.

Caught off guard, Steph scrambled to get her emotions under control before forcing a smile. “Oh, no, I merely baked some treats for the first time in ages. It took me a while to find you two out here—”

The basket was, in fact, filled with handmade doughnuts.

“Thanks, I love this stuff.”

“...Mm. So...tasty...”

They took the doughnuts off her hands and started munching away.

—The same reaction as usual.

But something about the pair served to reinforce this baseless feeling that lingered in Steph’s mind.

She paused for a moment before opting to mention that feeling.

“U-um... I can’t help but feel you two seem a bit...depressed...?”

A silly question with an obvious answer.

—Blank doesn’t lose.

That was basically their mantra at this point.

Unlike in their battle against Holou, where they lost to Jibril in order to pull off a win in the end—this was a legitimate defeat.

Steph couldn’t imagine them not being depressed by this, however

—

“Hmm? Uh, not really... I’m perfectly fine.”

—Sora answered with a dubious expression, which left Steph gaping with shock.

“I mean, yeah, it’s not like we’re *not* upset. Any gamer gets upset when they lose. It sucks. I’ll be totally honest—it sucks so bad that I just wanna scream and smash my keyboard in half till the keys go flying everywhere.”

“...Brother... I’m pretty sure, you still need...to keep it classy... even when you’re upset...”

Sure, defeat sucked.

“But gamers don’t get depressed when they lose.”

“...Mm. We analyze our loss... Re-strategize... Then come back for a...”

“Rematch, where we’ll get our revenge when we emerge victorious. We don’t have time to get depressed; we gotta think things through.”

And those words rang true to Steph. She considered anything the siblings said at a moment like this to be genuine, heartfelt.

And yet—

“So anyway, we’re gonna do some analyzing of our own... Collect

our thoughts, that sort of thing. It's gonna take a while, so sorry, but if you don't need anything else, mind leaving us alone for a bit? Thanks for the doughnuts, though. Really, I mean it."

"...Thanks for...everything, Steph..."

Ah... I knew they'd say that. Steph clenched her right hand.

—*But I also shouldn't leave them alone like this.* Steph instinctively knew she had to stay.

"Uh, um! About what the Shrine Maiden was saying before—is it true? Did you two really lose?"

"Yup, we did." Without even looking at Steph, Sora gave it to her straight. "In a bad way, too. You can't really lose worse than how we did."

"...We got pummeled...on the world stage...for the first time, ever..."

Their answers got Steph choked up momentarily, but she shook her head. She knew she needed to stay strong.

"B-but—even though Elven Gard almost had us, you two were able to keep the secret information out of their hands!! Not to mention you also allied with the Dwarves and Foeniculum—and all the Fairies who aren't slaves. One loss and one victory... Doesn't that kind of make this a tie?"

...Sure, this was by and large due to luck.

Foeniculum happened to be a fan of Sora and Shiro, and Reginleif the Enlightened intervened on their behalf, even though the dragon wasn't exactly on their side.

Nonetheless, Sora and Shiro were able to take Elkia back. Nothing could change that.

The Elves' scheme failed, and the Commonwealth stayed together, their bonds now stronger than ever.

Half the world might be against them, but Sora and Shiro still had more than enough power to fight back.

So I think it's safe to call this one a draw, Steph thought.

"...Yeah, we lost one and won another; but a single loss is still a loss..." Unbridled frustration finally colored Sora's expression. "Taking over this world meant not losing even once."

Sora and Shiro expressed this sentiment on a daily basis—except there was something off about it this time.

Though the words were the same, Steph felt they now carried a slightly different nuance.

"...What do you mean?" she asked, voice quavering even as she kept her eyes fixed on Sora.

He said nothing—but after a few seconds, he caved to her stern

gaze and started explaining himself.

“Steph—remember what I said during our match with Jibril, back when we went up against Holou?”

“...You said all sorts of things. Would you mind being a bit more specific?”

“I mean the part about what happens when you suck at winning...”

Steph nodded; she remembered that conversation. “When you are playing against multiple opponents, if your victories stir up too much hate, the other players will grow wary and eventually conspire to take you out, was it...? I believe that’s what led to Jibril’s self-ruin.”

She was right—that’s exactly what happened.

It was the same reason the Great War never came to an end on its own.

And why a world bound by the Ten Covenants currently found itself in the same situation.

—To change the world, all the races needed to band together.

Even if this was done without bloodshed or loss of life, no matter what greater good this goal was touted to serve—anyone who didn’t want the world to change would consider Sora and Shiro’s plan an act of aggression.

Effectively: world domination.

And just like how world domination always failed, their goal was going to fail as well.

That is, if they tried to achieve it through logical means.

Such means couldn’t possibly help them this time around, not in this world. Therefore:

“So—we needed to hit our enemies with a sneak attack before they could band together.”

First, the siblings convinced the world that the Commonwealth wasn’t a threat.

Then they made it seem like a tricky entity, one that couldn’t so easily be dealt with.

That eventually led the rest of the world to suspect that the Commonwealth had some sort of unbeatable trump card capable of taking out an Old Deus.

But no one knew *who* had that trump card, and that sowed the seeds of doubt and suspicion.

This was how Sora and Shiro effectively maneuvered the Commonwealth’s position up until now. They made it difficult for other players to team up against them.

—Blank needed to never lose.

—Blank couldn't afford to lose, not even once.

It was more than just a motto—it was a goal that had to be achieved no matter what.

A condition required to take on the world.

“But obviously, there's a limit to how far we could take this. If we kept on winning, the other players would eventually be willing to accept the risk that came with teaming up against us. The Commonwealth became too large to ignore—it was only a matter of time before this happened.”

They had Immanity, Werebeast, Flügel, Siren, Dhampir, and a single Old Deus on their side.

Seven of the sixteen Ixseeds were part of the Commonwealth.

Just under half was the tipping point—that was the most they could get while still flying under the radar.

“—That's why we used our poison. We were going to try to bring in three...ideally more than four races to our side in one fell swoop.”

Had they succeeded, they would've had ten races; had things gone perfectly, they'd have more than eleven. That would've left just five or six.

The siblings tried their absolute hardest to keep anyone from turning the tables even if they wanted to.

“But not only did they see through our plan; they used it against us... We lost.”

And now—the world knew that Blank didn't have an unbeatable trump card.

Sora and Shiro had been brought to this world by Tet; it wasn't their own.

That said, they didn't have any special powers or a patron to support them. Defeat was always a possibility—they were mere humans.

Elven Gard, at the very least, definitely realized as much. That was most likely why they created an anti-Commonwealth coalition in the first place.

“What I'm trying to say is... We can't play the same way we have been anymore. Sneak attacks aren't gonna work from now on.”

So what happened when they figured this out?

The enemy would use *logical means* to crush their opponent: all-out war—a tried-and-true method since the dawn of time.

Violence was forbidden in this world, but all indirect forms of combat were allowed. Economic warfare, diplomatic warfare, civil disobedience; half the world was coming together to use these on Sora

and Shiro.

—With things as they were, there was no way of going forward without some sort of sacrifice.

The same scenario where the Eastern Union was brought to the brink of economic destruction—which was only avoidable thanks to the inclusion of Dwarf into the Commonwealth—was bound to happen to other nations in several different ways down the line.

That fate could no longer be stopped.

Sora and Shiro—two gamers—couldn't pull it off.

Moreover...their defeat brought this situation on.

Therefore—it was a massive loss in every sense of the word.

Sora explained this to Steph with a gloomy expression, but—

“—Wait. Wasn't *that* a matter of time in itself?”

—puzzled, she asked a question with a tilt of her head.

“...Huh...?”

The siblings stared blankly at Steph, who questioned things even further. “After all, no matter how skilled you two are at games—you're still only human. As a matter of fact, neither of you are remotely as capable as the average Immanity... You're barely even functional. I'm quite sure you would be pathetic failures regardless.”

“...Uh...Steph...”

“You two make mistakes all the time. I don't think we've ever had anything go exactly as planned before, and I highly doubt that's going to change—you always win by bluffing your way through the hard parts and figuring out the smaller details afterward. Now that I think about it, you've only ever managed to barely eke out your victories up until now...”

She meant no harm by any of this. Sora and Shiro could tell Steph was speaking in complete earnest—

“...Sheesh, Steph. You're ruthless even at a time like this...”

“.....J-just...take it easy, on us...okay...?”

—and her simple doubt brought them to tears.

Sora and Shiro were lower than the average Immanity.

—With this fact laid out on the table, Steph continued:

“You two didn't really think in your heart of hearts that you would never lose, right?”

“.....Uh, I mean, i-it's not like we're *that* full of ourselves...”

She kept on kicking them while they were down, striking fear into their hearts with a thorough tongue-lashing...

She was so ruthless, it was almost entertaining to Sora, who broke into a pained smile and thought:

Yeah, she's right—Blank's always been this way.

—We walk the thinnest of tightropes.

One wrong step is all it takes—and kaput. That's why we plan for that misstep.

Making a mistake and falling off the tightrope is a part of the game. Sometimes it's even the premise of our strategies.

But you can't plan for everything, so you just put your heart and soul into recovering.

That's why—

"It should be obvious that we've been ready for a critical error that'd make us lose."

The key is how fast you can make your recovery—and how you recover. Making the right move quickly to recover properly would be the terms of the game. That's what we thought, at least—but.

"But this time—we haven't made a *single mistake yet*."

".....Come again?"

"No matter how many times Shiro and I think it over, we can't figure out why we lost."

After going over every little detail, their plan was perfect no matter how you sliced it.

Even if Elven Gard was able to see through the plan, there was no way to escape it other than by remaining isolated.

This worked to pull one over on that freak of nature Veig Drauvnir—the world's strongest Dwarf who just bullshitted his way through anything that was thrown at him—which proves it should've worked this time, too.

Sora and Shiro were convinced the plan was foolproof, perfect.

"We executed our plan to the letter, without a single mistake, and yet they turned it on its head and used it against us. So how exactly did we lose? We can't figure it out at all..."

—Elkia had been sealed off within a spatial phase boundary.

That required prior consent, which couldn't have been achieved on the fly right as the Commercial Confederation was making their confessions.

And at the very least, every member of parliament—the spies who were in cahoots with the various races—would've had to agree on the spot to erase Elkia, too. That move was without a doubt premeditated.

The problem was: *When* did they do it?

Not only did Elven Gard need to weed out which spy worked for which race, but they also needed to lay their trap before Sora and Shiro caught on. They wouldn't have been able to move behind the scenes so easily otherwise.

But they shouldn't have thought of that if they'd believed the siblings were hiding an unbeatable trump card up their sleeve.

In short: Elven Gard sensed Sora and Shiro were keeping their cards close to their chests.

They knew that Blank was just two Immanities who didn't have any special powers or support.

The Elves predicted the utterly inconceivable—that Blank could even take down an Old Deus.

Then and only then could they make a move.

So...when did they find out? How long had they known what Sora and Shiro were up to?

The two siblings mulled this over, and the best answer they could come up with was the enemy had been onto them since *before their game with Holou*.

Which meant it was sometime *soon after the Commonwealth had absorbed the Eastern Union*, maybe even *earlier*...

This enemy would've had to predict what Sora and Shiro were going to do from that point on—their every goal, every clandestine move.

—Was that even possible?

If it was—if it *truly* was—then they might have a far more serious problem on their hands.

Can we even beat an opponent of that caliber?

What if Elven Gard really did read all their moves from the very beginning...?

What if they were the ones who had Sora and Shiro establish the Commonwealth and amass all the Race Pieces?

Those were the questions that had weighed on the siblings' minds as they wandered through the castle and eventually ended up here:

—The Elkia Royal Castle's veranda.

The place where it all started. What if they had been onto us from here?

No—that's impossible. I'm thinking too much about this. We can't let our suspicions get the best of us.

But still... What if...?

The two siblings felt a collective chill run down their spines as they began doubting everything they thought they knew.

...What if we're the ones playing into the hands of someone else?

What if we're mere pawns being used to destroy Disboard?

It was the first time Sora and Shiro lost control over the flow of the game; they wondered if they ever really had any control to begin

with...

“Hey, Steph... I wonder if what we’re trying to do is really the right thing...”

Unable to keep his thoughts to himself, Sora finally shared his doubts with Steph.

Saying it out loud put his heart in an ice-cold vise grip—a chill that wasn’t quite self-loathing and anguish. However:

“Um, no? Of course it’s not. I thought you knew that already.”

Steph cocked her head again and calmly shut Sora down.

.....

...Wh...at.....?

“You two have been in the wrong this entire time. You’re both mistakes as people, and everything you achieve turns out to be completely off the rails. I’ve always thought you and Shiro were able to pull off all these mistakes because you’re both not right in the head, but if neither of you even realize that, this may be far worse than I ever imagined.”

““””

Sora and Shiro froze in bewilderment.

“That’s right,” Steph went on. “No matter what you do, you’ll always be in the wrong.”

—But. She took a breath.

Without changing the tone of her voice, she continued, “Now it’s your turn, Sora. Do you remember what I said to you during our match with Jibril back when we fought Holou?”

“...You said all sorts of things... Mind being a bit more... specific...?”

Steph was giving Sora a taste of his own medicine.

Seeing as he decided to play along, she responded:

“The irrational idea that *‘if someone must be sacrificed, then we should all die indiscriminately’*—that is definitely the wrong thing.”

—The stars twinkled in the sky as Steph spoke.

“But that’s precisely why you will *sacrifice no one*—a line of reasoning I’m willing to stick with to the end.”

The clouds had lifted, revealing a night sky filled with pale light.

“You two aren’t in the wrong there—that much I can assure you.”

Bathed in moonlight, Steph beamed gracefully. Her usual tone of voice, her usual smile, her usual gaze.

—That’s right: Nothing had changed.

Whatever the two siblings did was always full of mistakes.

But their mistakes had an end in sight. They were a means to their end goal.

It was their desire—the Commonwealth's desire.

And it was truer and more noble than anything else in this world.

Thus, Steph said what Sora would usually tell her.

“What difference does it make? You're trying to change the world without a single sacrifice—if it gets destroyed in the process, then that was bound to happen anyway. ♪”

“.....”

With a strained smile, she stuck out her tongue before adding, “Oh, b-but of course, the Shrine Maiden, Mr. Ino, and I will do our best to keep that from happening!! The same goes for Izuna, and Jibril and Azril, and Emir-Eins and the rest of the Ex Machina. Not to mention Til and Queen Laila, along with Foeniculum, Holou, and even Mr. Plum—you have the entire Commonwealth on your side.”

The siblings watched as Steph frantically rattled off a list of names, and they thought:

Yeah. Changing the world... That's not something two gamers could've done from the get-go.

“So pay no mind to the rest—and simply be your usual selves.”

Exactly. Sora and Shiro needed to be themselves. Do what they've done up until that very point—calmly stir the pot.

“Gamers have to act like gamers. Stop thinking about any responsibilities that no one bothers with and just play the game. That is precisely what you two were meant to do. ♪”

I'll always be here for you both...

Sora looked at Steph, who had a smile that outshined the stars in the sky.

“...Uh, say, Steph... Is it cool if...”

“...we call you...Mom, from now...on...?”

“T-talk about out of left field!! I—I can't say I'm fine with that, no!! I'll pass!!”

Steph was so tolerant...it was almost motherly. The two couldn't help but let the words escape their mouths.

Everything started here. Sora made his first move when he gave his coronation speech on this very balcony.

But at that moment, they weren't alone—they had Steph. And she was going to be there for them from here on out as well.

She would be the same Steph, even as they tried to change the world.

They were sure of that.

“So anyway—I take back what I said before about you leaving us alone.”

“...Will you...join us while...we think...?”

“Hmph! I shouldn’t have to tell you that I don’t know the first thing about games!!”

“Yeah, yeah, we know. We have about as much faith in you as a grain of mustard, so chill out.”

“Well, now it’s just sad when you put it like that!!”

Between the crimson moon and the glittering starlight, Steph could see that Sora’s and Shiro’s grins were back to normal.

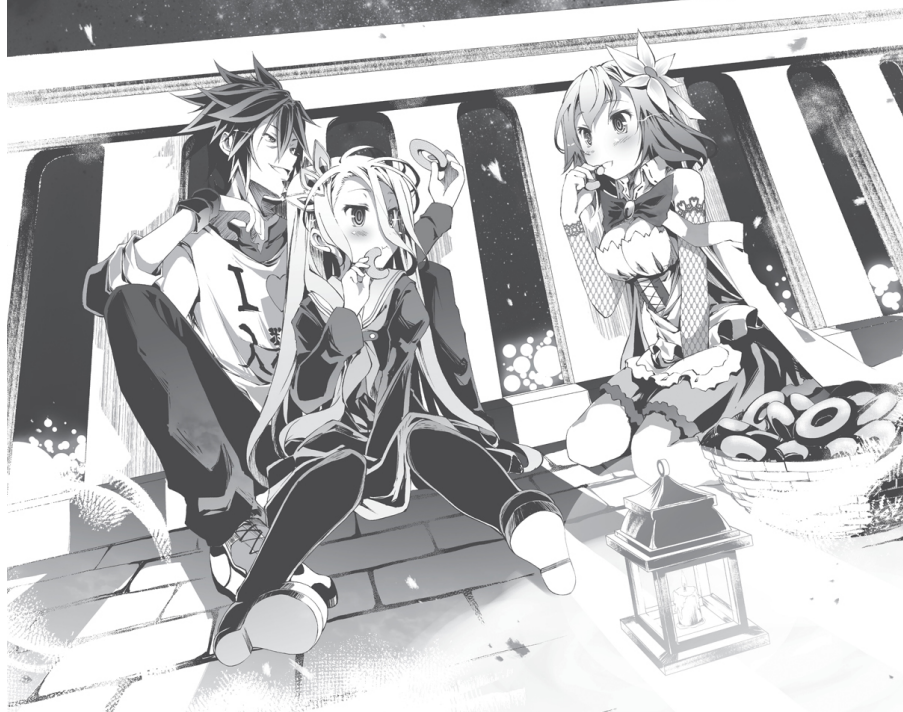
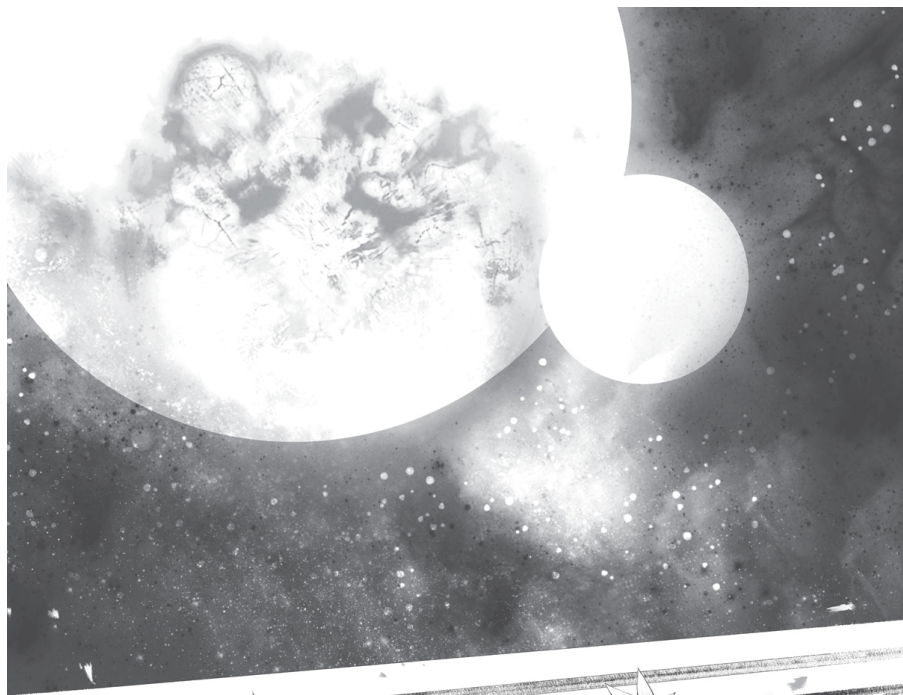
This brought her great relief as she yelled at the two.

Doughnuts in hand, the gamers who risked their very future spent the night thinking...

.....

That’s right. A gamer is as a gamer does.

Losing didn’t change what they needed to do.



They would never in a million years forget who defeated them:
Elven Gard— No... Auri-El.

The Elf agent plenipotentiary—Auri-El Violhart.

This ain't over yet...



Far off in the distance, a giant chess piece loomed over the horizon. Perched atop the black king piece's crown was a small boy kicking his legs.

Technically he wasn't a boy, or even a human, for that matter; his eyes, with their diamond-and-spade-shaped pupils, were on a book in his hands. It was the One True God, Tet. He smiled.

"This little book has really started to fill up. I bet the story's approaching its end."

He sounded very excited but also somewhat lonely.

A medley of emotions struck Tet as he flipped through the book.

Now...what should this page say next?

He looked out at the crimson moon and thought for a moment.

Eventually—perhaps the result of a sudden divine revelation—the One True God began writing on the blank page with a feathered quill.

"“The second coming of the weakest—found an archrival in the second coming of the strongest.” ☆”

—Yeah, I like it. ♪

He briefly stared at the sentence with significant satisfaction before gazing into the distance again.

What he saw was a world on the verge of changes that could never be undone.

Was the world he created going to end as a long, drawn-out, dysfunctional game?

Or would it end just as he hoped—this time, as the most fun game in existence?

It was all or nothing for this six-thousand-year-long *once-in-a-lifetime* gamble. The outcome of which not even the One True God knew.

Tet watched with mounting anticipation as the game at last plunged into its climax.

“...See you soon. —Next time, on the chessboard.”

A promise he held dear.

A future he awaited with all his heart.

“He’s gonna be your biggest obstacle if you want to keep your promise, Blank.”

You can do this, right? I’m counting on it, you know. I believe in you.

So hurry up and get over here.

Bring the world—bring him—with you.

You’re almost there—to a world where we can all play together.

Meet me here, in the future.....

TEMPORARY END

Many hurdles had yet to be cleared, problems yet to be solved.

But nonetheless, Elkia Royal Castle had achieved a semblance of normalcy, marked by the echoes of an astonished shriek through its corridors.

“A space that only couples can leave?! Why wasn’t I invited?!”

—Once Til learned about the game *Foeniculum* played with Sora and the others during Elkia’s disappearance, she let out a shrill screech from the bottom of her soul. Joining her in the throne room were Sora and Shiro, who covered their ears as they answered her.

“My best guess is all the stuff with you and Hardenfell had way too much to do with the poison— Wait a sec. You wanted to come, too...?”

“...If you did...who would you...have gone, after? Me...or Bro—?”

“Huh?! S-so how did it end?!”

Til failed to notice Shiro’s sharp gaze and pressed further about the results of the game. Sora had a thought...

Hmmm... The results...?

Truth is, there are no real results.

All their romantic feelings were enhanced while they were in the space. The resulting couples were the products of those feelings. Just as *Foeniculum* said, once they left the space, their feelings returned to normal.

—*Actually... That’s not quite right.*

For Sora, there was one big change:

“I was forced by the Covenants to never get a girlfriend for the rest of my life.”

“Just what turn of events led to *that* result?!” Til cried.

It was the truth.

—While the game involved overcoming a myriad of different challenges, this was the only lingering result once all was said and done.

“So then, S-Sir, does that truly mean you’ll be single for life?!”

“Yeah, that about sums it up.”

“—...Huh? You don’t seem very upset about this, you don’t... Sir...?”

Yeah... That’s ’cause there’s nothing upsetting about it.

In fact, I’ve never felt this pure in all my life.

Sora’s smile was as clear and sunny as a fresh spring day. Til stared at him, puzzled.

Why do people feel pain and suffering in the first place?

In Sora and Shiro’s old world, there was a great man who 2,600 years prior sought to answer this very question. After a long life spent training his mind and spirit, he found his answer and absolved all his suffering.

The answer the great man found—was *desire*.

—People are born, and then they die... This is an inescapable law of nature.

No matter how much money you make, or how great your achievements are, all things in the world eventually turn to dust. People suffer because they attempt to defy nature—they desire to stop this cycle.

However...Sora was forced to give up his desire.

—*I’ll never be able to get a girlfriend.*—

The Covenants took his doubts and, in the same way all things eventually turn to dust, rendered them an immutable law of nature.

For Sora, the concept of a girlfriend was now nothing more than the moon’s beautiful reflection on the water’s surface.

He no longer needed to lament never getting one of his own. His heart and mind were free of suffering.

“Regret: Permanent loss of this unit’s bright future spent with Master. Report: Re-observing emotion known as ‘despair.’ Nothing really matters anymore. This unit only feels pain...”

“Thanks, Emir-Eins. Your feelings were honestly wasted on me. I won’t be able to reciprocate—but I’d be really grateful if we stayed together as gamers going forward. I’m really sorry.”

He couldn’t love her back. The Covenants wouldn’t allow it___!!

“Master’s girlfriend is far too lofty a position for myself. I shall continue yearning for you from afar.”

“Thank you, Jibril. I know you don’t need to hear me say this, but you’re always there for me when I need you the most. Can Shiro and I keep counting on you, as your masters—and as fellow gamers?”

“Ah... Your words are too much for me...! It would be the highest of honors!”

Alas... He was no longer capable of reciprocating these beautiful ladies’ affections!

Sora was divorced from all love! It was now merely the glimmer of a distant star!!

He could only gaze at the intrinsic beauty born from its unattainability with a faint, placid smile.

—*Why can’t I get a girlfriend?*

A question he need not agonize over as he had for all his days... for such desires were now physically impossible to achieve!!

Having cast away his desires and attained a worldly truth, Sora reached the same place as the aforementioned enlightened man from his previous world. His new presence of mind brought him to a new conclusion, one from a different school of thought. It was a sentence written on the gates of hell:

“...Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.”

This was surely a revelation delivered by the gods themselves, a final salvation.

Even when damned to an eternity in hell—so long as you rid yourself of all hope...you at least won’t have to spend those days in despair...

“Your turn, little Dora. You’ve lost your chance, just as we did. ♪”

“Whaaat?! I—I didn’t lose anything from Sora—”

“Recommendation: This love will never be fulfilled. Lady Dol should face the facts. *Kommen sie.*”

All Sora could do was watch fondly as the former Girl-on-Girl Alliance momentarily reconvened.

Ah... How foolish I was.

I have Shiro by my side—and all these beautiful women to gaze upon.

That’s more than a blessing in itself; my world was already filled with brilliant light.

All my suffering was born from treating them as potential girlfriends, from my superfluous carnal desires.

And now I’ll never be able to hook up with any of them.

Sora was convinced. Free of all worldly concerns, he could appreciate these precious ladies with a pure mind...

It was like coveting a flower that would eventually lose its petals. Or shedding a tear over the stars he would never be able to reach. He felt like he was looking at a painting, moved by the beauty

conveyed though its canvas.

He could simply be present, feeling nothing but tenderness...

Ah yes—now I can appreciate these things in earnest. How sacred a woman's love is when it has no relation to the self; how sublime. Now I understand how Fairies—and Foeniculum—must feel...!!

Sora's mind was enveloped with all the serenity of a windless lake's surface—

“Hmm? Sora, you do realize you swore on the Covenants to never get a *girlfriend* for the rest of your life, right?”

—when a certain Fairy *poofed* onto the scene out of thin air and proceeded to shatter his newfound calm.

That's right—she was about to dump a massive boulder into his still, windless lake.

“There's lots of other relationships you can have, like lovers, friends with benefits—heck, you can even make your own harem. You're still within your Covenant-given rights to up and skip the whole girlfriend part and just get hitched if you really want to. ♣”

In that moment, time all but stopped.

At least, it most certainly did in Elkia Royal Castle's throne room.

And then it switched back on—at which point...

““““”””””

...even Sora noticed the passion reignited within the eyes of his beautiful, saddened female companions.

You little shit... Why would you do this after I managed to abandon all hope and achieve nirvana...?!

Sora communicated this sentiment to Foeniculum through a single glare, but a grin was succinct enough to get her response across:

___'Cause it's loads more interesting that way, duh. ♣___

“...Oookay, let's take a moment to process this. Right, guys? ... Guys?”

The group slowly closed in on Sora.

But he just barely managed to keep that boulder from crash-landing. Sora thrust his arms out, stopping the ladies in their tracks.

Heh, heh-heh... You almost had me there, but I'm still in control.

Foeniculum's game produced another result—well, not exactly a result, but more of a *reconfirmation*.

___*Shiro and I are two in one.*

We'll always be together—until she pushes me away. That promise

means more to me than any Covenants ever could.

They mean nothing! I may have lost sight of this absolute truth due to how obvious it is, but now I once again see the light!

Even on the off chance I wanted to get involved with one of these women...it isn't my decision alone to make!!

If my other half—Shiro—says no, then the answer is a resounding no! Therefore, Foeniculum's words have no effect on me!!

Ironclad in his convictions, Sora gazed down at his lap, where his sister sat.

However:

She responded just as she had on their first night in this world. It was like déjà vu; Shiro gave him a thumbs-up and answered:

"...Brother, grats on losing your virginity."

"Why are you cool with it now?!"

Why?! WHY NOW, OF ALL TIMES?!

Sora panicked; he attempted to keep the women homing in on him at bay by shouting "Whooooa, whoa, whoa, Shiro!! And the rest of you!! Everyone, just cool it for a sec!! Shiro, *you're* the one who made it impossible for me to get a girlfriend!! I legit have no idea why you're giving me the go-ahead here and now!!"

Shiro, however, was silent in the face of her brother's desperate inquisitions.

She smiled faintly—her answer had been based on simple logic.

...Brother will, never...abandon me...

That's right—Shiro knew her brother would never leave her side.

Nobody could take him away from her, nor would she ever leave him.

Their bond had long since surpassed that of lovers, let alone spouses.

So what if he makes a pass at someone—or vice versa? No problem whatsoever.

...Brother promised...he'd make a pass at me, down the line... Losing his virginity...sooner rather than, later...works out better...for me.

—She actually wanted him to make a move on someone else.

Then he would be out of excuses for not making a move on her!!

Lovers, trysts, friends with benefits—even a harem...

Shiro reconfirmed that these relationships were effectively meaningless compared to her own position.

In other words, she was his *first lady*—his *queen*.

She was the one and only *true heroine* of his story, the ultimate position to be in.

And that position was immovable. This fact was all the reassurance she needed to ask her next question.

“...So...Brother... Who are you...gonna do, first?”

“Heh... Heh-heh-heh-heeeh, indeed!! I’ll take care of this, I will!! Your first time should be with your big sister, it should!!”

“In what culture?! Is that how they do things in Hardenfell?! Like a budget porno?! Also, Til, let me check something real quick—do you still consider yourself my older sister?!”

“I understand Master’s world has a practice wherein a man comes of age by honing his sexual prowess with an older woman before he marries. In which case—why not elect the eldest of us to—?”

“You’re talking about a single culture from a specific part of our world during the Middle Ages!!”

“Conjecture: Little Sister’s presence is inhibiting Master... Report: This unit is an Ex Machina. An unfeeling machine. A tool. Relations with said tool equivalent to masturbation. No impediments involved in sexual relations with this unit. *Umarmen?*”

“You can’t just pick and choose when to act like a machine!! Even a tool’s gotta have some sort of shame!!”

“If you can’t decide, Master, why not simply have us all at once?
♥”

“Wait just one moment!!” Steph hollered. “You had better not be including me in that count!!”

“Awww, yeahhh! ❀ That’s the kinda love I like to see! The more races, the better!!”

“Where the hell do you get off, calling *this* love?!”

It was safe to say Foeniculum was at the center of all this chaos.

Sora saw her eating up this exchange like popcorn at the movies and proceeded to yell at her. Then he thought:

Yeah—I knew it was impossible. I was delusional to think a loser like me could ever achieve enlightenment like the great figures of yore.

I don’t know anything. Literally. Not even the simplest things.

I’m surrounded by beautiful women, and Shiro’s given me her blessing—so why am I pushing them away?!

—Maybe I never wanted to be popular with the ladies...?

I don’t even know anymore.

This game’s rules make no sense. How much longer till I get out...?

“Hey, Sora! Whatcha think about Izuna?! I’d kill to see an Immanity and a Werebeast hook up! Now that I spent all our dough on freeing Elkia, I’m fresh outta souls!! I can make ’em all back if you let me stream your romantic escapades, though!! And let’s get that Old Deus Holou involved!! I bet that cross-dressing Dhampir boy would be a hit, too! Ooh, and also, my intel gave me the scoop that there’s an Elf with giant boobs and a flat-chested Immanity who’re lesbianing together! Where the heck are you hiding them?!”

“Quit making this even more confusing!! And there’s *no way in hell those two would be here!!*” Sora shouted at the Fairy’s call for further chaos.

Eventually, he waved the horde of beautiful women away one by one.

And just like he always did—he grabbed Shiro’s hand and ran off, not understanding anything that was happening to him...



To the west of Lucia—lay the continent of Valar.

Up until two months ago, this territory was known as the Elven Gard state of Tírnóg.

As recently as seven days prior, it was a Commonwealth enclave in the process of being reclaimed.

It was now, however, occupied by the Republic of Elkia.

Something of a new frontier for the Immanity, the city retained some of its original Elven splendor as it welcomed its new residents—escapees from the Commonwealth—in droves.

All roads throughout the city convened at its center, where a large white building stood. Originally the manor of the Elf who governed Tírnóg, it had been transformed into a public building for Elkian redevelopment.

And at present—it was a government office within the Republic of Elkia.

Inside, it housed an assembly hall where an ad hoc parliament discussed— No...this could hardly be considered a discussion. The conversation had devolved into an exchange of bitter invectives...

—No surprise there, as most of the members present were from the former Commercial Confederation—spies for various races.

In other words: Parasites who used their patrons to outsmart one another and line their own pockets. Traitors who turned on their country for personal profit.

There was no hope for any constructive discourse among those who put themselves and their foreign stakeholders first.

And now these same people were touting themselves as the legitimate Elkia, the ones who truly served Immanity. It was like a bad joke, and worst of all: They actually believed it...

—I realize things must be quite tough right now in the Commonwealth, but the Republic is effectively a dumpster full of corrupt nobles and politicians.

Beneath her plastered-on smile, a young woman secretly cursed the entire parliament as she made her way through the door.

As soon as she stepped through—silence fell.

The councillors ceased their bickering at the drop of a hat the moment they saw two ladies enter the chamber.

—No surprise there, either. These two were the reason why the councillors were so chatty to begin with.

The pair had brought them here just in the nick of time before Stephanie Dola could exact their punishment. The traitors sat in eager silence.

A bewitchingly stunning Elf with pale golden hair wordlessly followed a black-haired Immanity straight through the chamber. Unfazed by the councillors' prying eyes, the latter of the two seated herself at the head of the assembly.

—These two women were:

Elven Gard's delegated inspector general—Fiel Nirvalen.

And right in front of her: president of the Republic of Elkia's parliament—Chlammy Zell.

“Now... Come—let the game begin.”

Chlammy wore an evil, twisted grin, her eyes full of disgust as she uttered—her declaration.

AFTERWORD

“...We should probably get this out of the way first. Let’s hear your justification for the three-year hiatus.”

Kamiya saw his new editor, O, smiling back at him through the computer screen.

In that moment, he was secretly grateful for the times we live in.

After all, there was no danger of his editor wringing his neck in a virtual meeting!!

So, utterly unfazed—Kamiya simply put on a troubled expression as he answered.

“Well, see, sometimes Tet really takes his sweet time with his manuscripts. My hands are tied here.”

“Right... I’m not quite sure I follow. Could you please elaborate?”

Kamiya nodded sagely and proceeded to explain himself to his still-smiling editor.

“You know how there’s an ongoing debate as to whether it’s okay to use foreign idioms and expressions—or words like *karma* that refer to real-life history and religion—within a fantasy context?”

“Yes, I’m well aware.”

“Basically, in my case—I’m adapting *Tet’s material*, so it’s all right for me to use real-world jargon.”

“...Go on.”

The editor leaned in, interested in what Kamiya had to say.

“As portrayed on multiple occasions throughout the series—Tet is the author of *No Game No Life*,” Kamiya continued mirthfully. “It’s the literal word of God, a myth. All I do is translate that into Japanese. So if someone says it’s weird to use real-world jargon in a fantasy setting, then they have more of an issue with language itself. Don’t get me wrong; the original manuscript is written in Tet’s language. It’s my job to translate that into modern Japanese so that readers will understand the various nuances that arise. Just take a look at Jibril’s tendency to borrow words from English. And in the English translation, she uses French.”

“I see. You may have a point there.”

—To be honest, this spiel is nothing new.

It’s essentially the same thing the granddaddy of high-fantasy

works said when he penned a certain tale about a ring. Kamiya decided not to mention that tidbit and brazenly continued!

“I can’t get you your manuscript if Tet doesn’t give me mine. You wanna know the reason he took three years on this one? I haven’t got a clue. We’ll have to ask him. I bet he was gaming or something!”

Kamiya laid out the perfect excuse for his editor, who answered with the same unflinching smile.

“All right, then. So you won’t have any problem with me sending the royalties for this book to Tet?”

“Uh.”

“The same goes for the previous volumes. If you’ve been translating the manuscripts for us this entire time, then we’ll have to make some changes to our contract...”

“Um, about that...”

“I’ll have to double-check with legal, but we may also have been overpaying you, in which case—”

Hello, everyone! It’s the author who’s kept you waiting for three and a half years—Yuu Kamiya!! I am truly, deeply sorry for the long wait for this volume. I’m also incredibly grateful for the readers who were willing to hold out.

“So what was the real reason you took so long this time?”

Yes, allow me to set the record straight with my new editor, O.

You see... If I write out my entire excuse, it’ll end up too long to be anything of interest. So I’ll just leave it at “I really let myself go.” To put it in the vaguest terms possible...

Have you ever heard the phrase “Anything that doesn’t kill you makes you stronger”?

“I have, sure. It’s fairly common.”

Indeed. It’s clear and easy to understand—succinct, to the point.

However, I think it might be *too* straightforward—it’s worth more thought than just taking it at face value.

For example...

...if you leave a scratch untreated, it could potentially turn into a life-threatening festering wound. That sort of thing.

Just because something doesn’t flat-out kill you doesn’t mean you should work right through it.

It should be “What doesn’t kill you eventually heals.” You gotta treat whatever isn’t killing you, right? Right?!

The human body simply isn’t fit to go beyond its limits.

It's just as the great Nietzsche once said: The mind is but a slave to the flesh!! A broken body is a broken vessel for the mind; it's only a matter of time before the latter breaks as well...

When it gets to that point, that's when you start wondering why you're so bad at life.

—Why? Uh...because you let yourself go?

You're so broken that you can't even recognize that yourself. What are you, stupid?

For those of you out there who don't wish to be treated like an idiot by a medical professional, please, please take care of yourselves.

It's very important to recover from whatever failed to kill you!

There's no greater resource than your own health!

Which brings us to what happened to me. Basically, I'd expended every bit of that resource and ended up destitute—or...more like I'd accrued so much debt that it took me several years to pay back what I owed!

And now I can finally see a day on the horizon where I'm debt free!!

"Aaalll righty then! Why don't we talk about something a bit more lighthearted?!"

Sounds good to me!! I love lighthearted conversations!! Bring 'em on!

"I'm actually a big *No Game No Life* fan. It was my dream to be your editor when I first joined this publishing company! You have no idea how happy it made me to get this job. It brings a tear to my eye seeing my name in your books!!"

...

.....Oh. Huh... Thanks. Much obliged...

"Wh-what? Why are you so standoffish all of a sudden?!"

I mean... In my experience, whenever an editor shills compliments like that, it's only because they want something. You know, kinda like how the Italian Mafia sends someone a gift before they whack 'em.

I can already hear the next words that'll come out of your mouth: "*So when's the next volume coming?*"

"...I can't begin to imagine the struggles you've been through. And I was just trying to keep the conversation lighthearted."

—Wait. So you really meant what you said to me just now?

"Of course! I've been a fan ever since I was *in college*. They made a huge impact on me, even now."

Y-you really are serious!!

Congratulations—and thank you!! It makes me so happy to hear

you—

—Hold on. Did you say *college*?

“Yes, I did. Is something wrong?”

No, uh... So how long have you been working for this publisher...?

“Oh, about eight years, give or take.”

—Come again? So you read my books in college...and now... you’re my editor...?

Hmm? I’m having a hard time figuring out the math here.

“What’s there to be confused about? This is *No Game No Life*’s ten-year anniversary, after all.”

—HUHWHAAAAT? T-T-T-TEN YEARS? I’ve been writing this series for a *decade*?!

And—and—in those ten years I’ve only written twelve volumes, if you include *Practical War Game*?!

But wait—that also means I’ve aged ten years since I wrote the first volume!!

Then Shiro’s already legal by now!!

THERE’S NOTHING LIGHTHEARTED ABOUT THIS CONVERSATION AT ALL!!

“So! The series has reached its tenth year, the story is approaching its climax, and we’re about to introduce a new manga adaptation!! As your editor, I’m looking forward to getting your fans excited for what’s to come! And as a fan myself, I’m already excited to see what’s in store! Please get the next book finished so I can read it!!”

There it is!! I knew you’d start asking for the next volume!!

I mean, yeah, I’m gonna write it! I’ll write it without damaging the temple that is my body!

And of course I’ll ask the readers to look forward to the next installment! See you all again!!

But man, ten years...? Seriously...?



NOW SPLIT IN TWO, THE WORLD IS
HEADED FOR ALL-OUT WAR.

WILL SORA AND SHIRO BE ABLE TO PLAY
COUNTLESS GAMES TO STOP A MULTI-
INDEXED CLASH THAT WOULD RESULT IN
COUNTLESS SACRIFICES...?

THEY'LL NEED WHAT THE ONE TRUE GOD
ONCE SOUGHT: REASON, WIT, TALENT,
AND WEALTH...

—AND...YOU GUESSED IT!

SORA FINALLY REALIZES THE IMPORTANCE
OF A HEALTHY BODY AND TAKES UP A
STRENGTH-TRAINING REGIMEN!
WILL BRAWN OUTMUSCLE BRAIN?
OR ARE MUSCLES, IN FACT, THE TRUE
SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE...?!

**“STRENGTH!!
Knowledge doesn't
mean shit without a
healthy body!”**

No Game No Life, Volume 12

PARTIALLY A JOKE, THOUGH I'M EAGERLY
PENNING THIS RIGHT NOW...

“...Brother...your form's...getting
sloppy. Gimme...a hundred more
push-ups...”

COMBATANTS

WILL
BE

DISPATCHED!

LIGHT NOVEL
VOLUMES 1-6



MANGA
VOLUMES 1-4

©Masaki Kisa 2018 ©Natsume Akatsuki, Kakao • Lanthanum 2018 / KADOKAWA CORPORATION
©Natsume Akatsuki, Kakao • Lanthanum 2017 / KADOKAWA CORPORATION

AVAILABLE
NOW
WHEREVER
**BOOKS
ARE SOLD!**

With world domination nearly in their grasp, the Supreme Leaders of the Kisaragi Corporation—an underground criminal group turned evil megacorp—have decided to try their hands at interstellar conquest. A quick dice roll nominates their chief operative, Combat Agent Six, to be the one to explore an alien planet...and the first thing he does when he gets there is change the sacred incantation for a holy ritual to the most embarrassing thing he can think of. But evil deeds are business as usual for Kisaragi operatives, so if Six wants a promotion and a raise, he'll have to work much harder than that! For starters, he'll have to do something about the other group of villains on the planet, who are calling themselves the "Demon Lord's Army" or whatever. After all, this world doesn't need two evil organizations!



For more information
visit www.yenpress.com

IN THIS FANTASY WORLD, EVERYTHING'S A GAME—AND THESE SIBLINGS PLAY TO WIN!



No Game No Life © Yuu Kamiya 2012
KADOKAWA CORPORATION

**LIGHT NOVELS 1-11
AVAILABLE NOW**

A genius but socially inept brother and sister duo is offered the chance to compete in a fantasy world where games decide everything. Sora and Shiro will take on the world and, while they're at it, create a harem of nonhuman companions!



No Game No Life, Please! © Kazuya Yuizaki 2016 © Yuu Kamiya 2016
KADOKAWA CORPORATION

LIKE THE NOVELS?

Check out the spin-off manga for even more out-of-control adventures with the Werebeast girl, Izuna!



Follow us on



www.yenpress.com

THE Eminence IN Shadow

ONE BIG FAT LIE

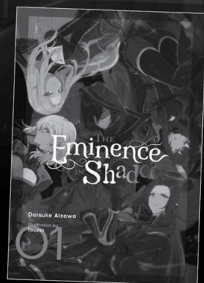
AND A FEW TWISTED TRUTHS

Even in his past life, Cid's dream wasn't to become a protagonist or a final boss. He'd rather lie low as a minor character until it's prime time to reveal he's a mastermind...or at least, do the next best thing—pretend to be one! And now that he's been reborn into another world, he's ready to set the perfect conditions to live out his dreams to the fullest. Cid jokingly recruits members to his organization and makes up a whole backstory about an evil cult that they need to take down. Well, as luck would have it, these imaginary adversaries turn out to be the real deal—and everyone knows the truth but him!



For more information
visit www.yenpress.com

IN STORES NOW!



KAGE NO JITSURYOKUSHA NI NARITAKUTE !

©Daisuke Aizawa 2018 Illustration: Touzai / KADOKAWA CORPORATION

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink